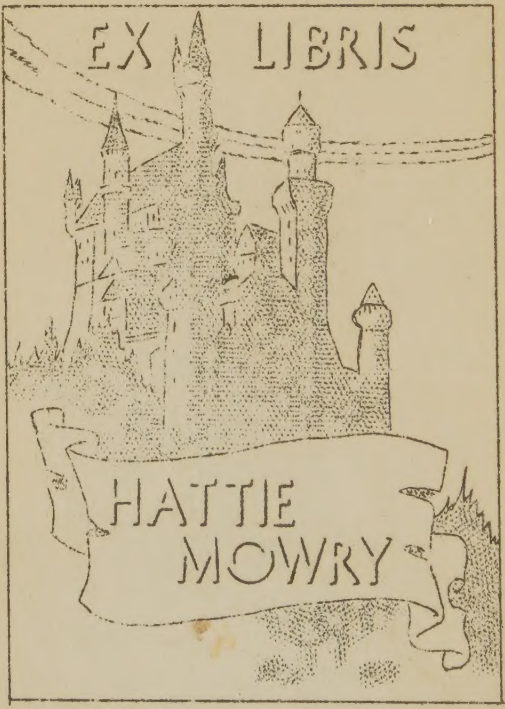


The Ranchman

Charles
Alden
Seltzer

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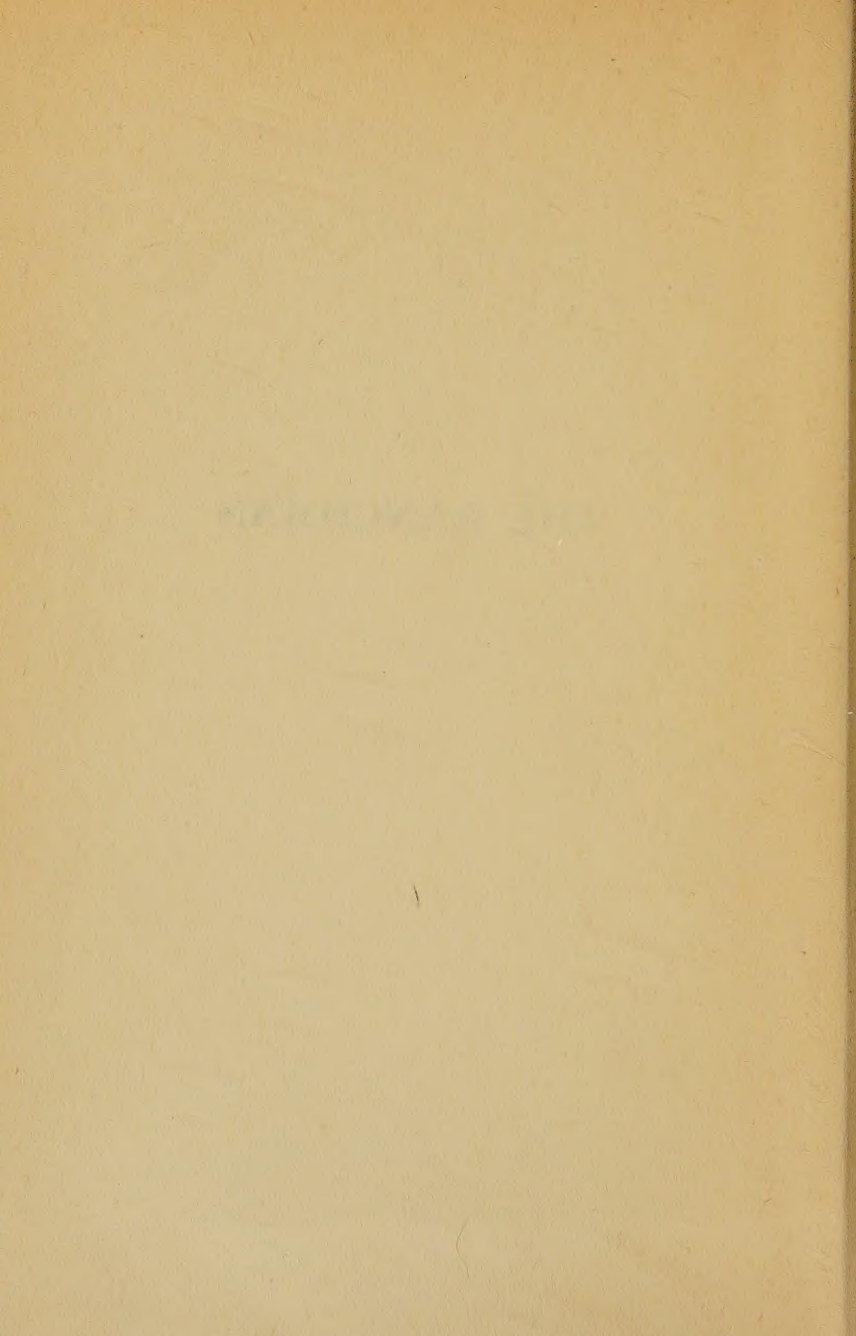
HATTIE
MOWRY



Charles Alden
Seltzer

DIED - FEB - 9 - 1942
AGE 66 YRS.

THE RANCHMAN





CARRINGTON LAUGHED JEERINGLY.

THE RANCHMAN

BY
CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

AUTHOR OF
THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y,
FIREBRAND TREVISION,
THE RANGE BOSS, Etc.

FRONTISPIECE BY
P. V. E. IVORY



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THE RANCHMAN

THE RANCHMAN

CHAPTER I

CONCERNING DAWES

THE air in the Pullman was hot and, despite the mechanical contrivances built into the coach to prevent such a contingency, the dust from the right-of-way persisted in filtering through crevices.

Even the electric fans futilely combated the heat; their droning hum bespoke terrific revolutions which did not materially lessen the discomfort of the occupants of the coach; and the dry, dead dust of the desert, the glare of a white-hot sun, the continuing panorama of waste land, rolling past the car windows, afforded not one cool vista to assuage the torture of travel.

For hours after leaving Kansas City, several of the passengers had diligently gazed out of the windows. But when they had passed the vast grass plains and had entered the desert, where their eyes met nothing but endless stretches of feathery alkali dust, beds of dead lava, and clumps of cacti with thorny spire and spatula blade defiantly upthrust as though in mockery of all

life—the passengers drew the shades and settled down in their seats to endure the discomfort of it all.

A *blasé* tourist forward reclined in one seat and rested his legs on another. From under the peak of a cap pulled well down over his eyes he smiled cynically at his fellow-passengers, noting the various manifestations of their discomfort. The tourist was a transcontinental traveler of note and he had few expectations. It amused him to watch those who had.

A girl of about twenty, seated midway in the coach to the left of the tourist, had been an intent watcher of the desert. With the covert eye of the tourist upon her she stiffened, stared sharply out of the window, then drew back, shuddering, a queer pallor on her face.

“She’s seen something unpleasant,” mused the tourist. “A heap of bleached bones—which would be the skeleton of a steer; or a rattlesnake—or most anything. She’s got nerves.”

One passenger in the car had no nerves—of that the tourist was convinced. The tourist had observed him closely, and the tourist was a judge of men. The nerveless one was a young man who sat in a rear seat staring intently out into the inferno of heat and sand, apparently absorbed in his thoughts and unaware of any physical discomfort.

“Young—about twenty-seven or twenty-eight—maybe thirty,” mused the tourist; “but an old-timer in

this country. I wised up to him when he got aboard at Kansas City. Been a miner in his time—or a cow-puncher. I'd hate to cross him."

Among the other passengers were two who attracted the attention of the tourist. They occupied the seat in front of the young man.

One of the two, who sat nearest the window, was not much older than the young man occupying the seat behind him. The tourist guessed his age to be around thirty-five or thirty-six. He was big, almost massive, and had lived well—as the slightly corpulent stomach revealed. Despite that, however, he was in good physical condition, for his cheeks glowed with good healthy color under the blue-black sheen of his fresh-shaved beard; there was a snapping twinkle in his black eyes, which were penetrating and steady; and there was a quiet confidence in his manner which told that he knew and appreciated himself. He was handsome in a heavy, sensuous fashion, and his coal-black hair, close-cropped and wavy, gave him an appearance of virility and importance that demanded a second look. The man seated beside him was undersized and ordinary-looking, with straight, iron-gray hair and a look of having taken orders all his life. The tourist set his age at fifty-five.

The girl was of the type that the tourist admired. He had seen her kind in the far corners of the world, on the thronged streets of cosmopolitan cities, in isolated sec-

tions of the world—the self-reliant, quietly confident American girl whose straight-in-the-eye glance always made a man feel impelled to respectfully remove his hat.

She was not beautiful, but she was undeniably good-looking. She was almost tall, and the ease and grace of her movements sufficed to convey to the tourist some conception of the symmetrical lines of her figure. If her features had been more regular, the girl would have been plain; but there was a slight uptilt to her nose that hinted of piquancy, denied by the quiet, steady eyes.

A brown mass of hair, which she had twisted into bulging coils and glistening waves, made the tourist wonder over her taste in that feminine art.

“She knows what becomes her,” he decided.

He knew the two men seated in front of the young man were traveling with her, for he had seen them together, with the older man patting her shoulder affectionately. But often she left them with their talk, which did not seem to interest her, while she withdrew to a distant seat to read or to gaze out of the window.

She had not seemed to notice either the man of colorless personality or the young man who occupied the seat behind her friends. If she had glanced at them at all it was with that impersonal interest one feels in the average traveler one meets anywhere.

But long ago — which, to be strictly accurate, was when

he had entered the coach at Kansas City—Quinton Taylor had been interested in her. He was content, though, to conceal that interest, and not once when she chanced to look toward him did she catch him looking at her.

Taylor knew he was no man to excite the interest of women, not even when he looked his best. And he knew that in his present raiment he did not look his best. He was highly uncomfortable.

For one thing, the white, starched collar he wore irritated him, choked him, reddening his face and bulging his eyes. The starched shirt had a pernicious habit of tightly sticking to him, the seams chafing his skin.

The ready-made suit he had bought at Kansas City was too small, and he could feel his shoulders bulging through the arms of the coat, while the trousers—at the hips and the knees—were stretched until he feared the cloth would not stand the strain.

The shoes were tight, and the derby hat—he glowered humorously at it in the rack above his head and gazed longingly at the suitcase at his feet, into which he had crammed the clothing he had discarded and which he had replaced at the suggestion of his banker in Kansas City. Cowboy rigging was not uncommon to Kansas City, the banker had told him, but still—well, if a man was wealthy, and wished to make an impression, it might be wise to make the change.

Not in years had Taylor worn civilized clothing, and

he was fully determined that before reaching his home town he would resume the clothing to which he was accustomed — and throw the new duds out of a window. He reddened over an imaginary picture of himself descending from the train in his newly acquired rigging to endure the humorous comments of his friends. Old Ben Mullarky, for instance, would think he had gone loco — and would tell him so. Yes, the new clothes were doomed; some ragged overland specimen of the genus “hobo” would probably find them or, if not, they would clutter up the right-of-way as the sad memento of a mistake he had made during a fit of momentary weakness.

As a matter of fact the girl had noticed Taylor. A girl will notice men, unconsciously. Sitting at her window even now, she was thinking of him.

She was not aware that she had studied him, or that she had even glanced at him. But despite her lack of interest in him she had a picture of him in mind, and her thoughts dwelt upon him.

She, too, had been aware that Taylor's clothes did not fit him. She had noticed the bulging shoulders, the tight trousers, the shoes, squeaking with newness, when once he had passed through the car to go out upon the platform. She had noticed him screwing his neck around in the collar; she had seen him hunch his shoulders intolerantly; she had seen that the trousers were too short;

that he looked like an awkward farmer or homesteader abroad on a pleasure trip, and decidedly uncomfortable in the unaccustomed attire.

She had giggled to herself, then. For Taylor did make a ridiculous figure. But later—when he had re-entered the car and she had looked fairly, though swiftly, at him as he advanced down the aisle—she had seen something about him that had impressed her. And that was what she was thinking about now. It was his face, she believed. It was red with self-consciousness and embarrassment, but she had seen and noted the strength of it—the lean, muscular jaw, the square, projecting chin, the firm, well-controlled mouth; the steady, steel-blue eyes, the broad forehead. It had seemed to her that he was humorously aware of the clothes, but that he was grimly determined to brazen the thing out.

Her mental picture now gave her the entire view of Taylor as he had come toward her. And she could see him in a different environment, in cowboy regalia, on a horse, perfectly at ease. He made a heroic figure. So real was the picture that she caught herself saying: “Clothes *do* make the man!” And then she smiled at her enthusiasm and looked out of the window.

Taylor had been thinking of her with the natural curiosity of the man who knows he has no chance and is not looking for one. But she had impressed him as resembling someone with whom he had been well ac-

quainted. For an hour he puzzled his brain in an endeavor to associate hers with some face of his recollection, but elusive memory resisted his demands on it with the result that he gave it up and leaned back as restfully as he could with the consciousness of the physical torture he was undergoing.

And then he heard the younger of the two men in front of him speak to the other:

"We'll make things hum in Dawes, once we get hold of the reins."

"But there will be obstacles, Carrington."

"Sure! Obstacles! Of course. That will make the thing all the more enjoyable."

There was a ring in Carrington's voice that struck a chord of sudden antagonism in Taylor, a note of cunning that acted upon Taylor instantly, as though the man had twanged discord somewhere in his nature.

Dawes was Taylor's home; he had extensive and varied interests there; he had been largely responsible for Dawes's growth and development; he had fought for the town and the interests of the town's citizens against the aggressions of the railroad company and a grasping land company that had succeeded in clouding the titles to every foot of land owned by Dawes's citizens—his own included.

And he had heard rumors of outside interests that were trying to gain a foothold in Dawes. He had paid

little attention to these rumors, for he knew that capital was always trying to drive wedges that would admit it to the golden opportunities afforded by new towns, and he had ascribed the rumors to idle gossip, being aware that such things are talked of by irresponsibles.

But the words, "Get hold of the reins," had a sound of craft and plotting. And there was something in Carrington's manner and appearance that suggested guile and smooth cunning. Seething with interest, Taylor closed his eyes and leaned his head back upon the cushion behind him, simulating sleep.

He felt Carrington turn; he could feel the man's eyes on him, and he knew that Carrington was speculating over him.

He heard the other man whisper, though he could not catch the words. However, he heard Carrington's answer:

"Don't be uneasy—I'm not 'spilling' anything. *He* wouldn't know the difference if I did. 'A homesteader hitting town for the first time in a year, probably. Did you notice him? Lord, what an outfit!'"

He laughed discordantly, resuming in a whisper which carried to Taylor:

"As I was saying, we'll make things hum. The good folks in Dawes don't know it, but we've been framing them for quite a spell—been feeding them Danforth. You don't know Danforth, eh? He's quite a hit with

these rubes. Knows how to smear the soft stuff over them. He's what we call a 'mixer' back in Chicago. Been in Dawes for about a year, working in the dark. Been going strong during the past few months. Running for mayor now—election is today. It'll be over by the time we get there. He'll win, of course; he wired me it was a cinch. Cost a lot, though, but it's worth it. We'll own Dawes before we get through!"

It was with an effort that Taylor kept his eyes closed. He heard nothing further, for the man's voice had dropped lower and Taylor could not hear it above the roar of the train.

Still, he had heard enough to convince him that Carington had designs on the future welfare of Dawes, and his muscles swelled until the tight-fitting coat was in dire danger of bursting.

Danforth he knew slightly. He had always disliked and distrusted the man. He remembered Danforth's public *début* to the people of Dawes. It had been on the occasion of Dawes's first anniversary and some public-spirited citizens had decided upon a celebration. They had selected Danforth as the speaker of the day because of his eloquence—for Danforth had seized every opportunity to publicly air his vigorous voice, and Taylor had been compelled to acknowledge that Danforth was a forceful and able speaker.

Thereafter, Danforth's voice often found the public

ear. He was a lawyer, and the sign he had erected over the front of the frame building adjoining the courthouse was as magnificent as Danforth was eloquent.

But though Taylor had distrusted Danforth, he had found no evidence—until now—that the lawyer intended to betray his fellow-citizens. Before leaving Dawes the week before he had heard some talk, linking Danforth's name with politics, but he had discredited the talk. His own selection had been Neil Norton, and he had asked his friends to consider Norton.

Taylor listened intently, with the hope of hearing more of the conversation being carried on between the two men in front of him. But he heard no more on the subject broached by Carrington. Later, however, his eyes still closed, still pretending to be asleep, he saw through veiled eyelids the girl rise from her seat and come toward the two men in front of him.

For the first time he got a clear, full view of her face and a deep, disturbing emotion thrilled him. For now, looking fairly at her, he was more than ever convinced that he had seen her before, or that her resemblance to someone he had known was more startling than he had thought.

Then he heard Carrington speak to her.

"Getting tired, Miss Harlan?" said Carrington. "Well, it will soon be ended, now. One more night on the train—and then Dawes."

The older man laughed, and touched the girl's arm playfully. "You don't mind it, do you, Marion?"

The older man said more, but Taylor did not hear him. For at his mention of the girl's given name, so soon after Carrington's pronouncement of "Harlan," Taylor's eyes popped open, and he sat erect, staring straight at the girl.

Whether her gaze had been drawn by his, or whether her woman's curiosity had moved her to look at him, Taylor never knew. But she met his wide gaze fairly, and returned his stare with one equally wide. Only, he was certain, there was a glint of mocking accusation in her eyes—to remind him, he supposed, that she had caught him eavesdropping.

And then she smiled, looking at Carrington.

"One is recompensed for the inconveniences of travel by the interesting characters one chances to meet."

And she found opportunity, with Carrington looking full at her, to throw a swift, significant glance at Taylor.

Taylor flushed scarlet. Not, however, because of any embarrassment he felt over her words, but because at that instant was borne overwhelmingly upon him the knowledge that the girl, and the man, Carrington, who accompanied her—even the older man—were persons with whom Fate had insisted that he play—or fight. They were to choose. And that they had chosen to fight was apparent by the girl's glance, and by Carrington's words, "We'll own Dawes before we get through."

Taylor got up and went to the smoking-room, where he sat for a long time, staring out of the window, his eyes on the vast sea of sagebrush that stretched before him, his mental vision fixed on an earlier day and upon a tragedy that was linked with the three persons in the coach — who seemed desirous of antagonizing him.

CHAPTER II

SLICK DUDS

AFTER a time Taylor's lips wreathed into a smile. He searched in his pockets—he had transferred all his effects from the clothing in the suitcase to his present uncomfortable raiment—and produced a long, faded envelope in danger of imminent disintegration.

The smile faded from his lips as he drew out the contents of the envelope, and a certain grim pity filled his eyes. He read:

SQUINT:

That rock falling on me has fixed me. There is no use in me trying to fool myself. I'm going out. There's things a man can't say, even to a friend like you. So I'm writing this. You won't read it until after I'm gone, and then you can't tell me what you think of me for shoving this responsibility on you. But you'll accept, I know; you'll do it for me, won't you?

I've had a lot of trouble — family trouble. It wouldn't interest you. But it made me come West. Maybe I shouldn't have come. I don't know; but it seemed best.

You've been a mighty persevering friend, and I know you from the ground up. You never inquired about my past, but I know you've wondered. Once I mentioned my daughter, and I saw you look sharp at me. Yes, there is a daughter. Her name is Marion. There was a wife and her brother, Elam Parsons. But only Marion counts. The others were too selfish and sneaking.

You won't be interested in that. But I want Marion taken care of. She was fifteen when I saw her last. She looked just like me; thank God for that! She won't have any of the characteristics of the others!

Squint, I want you to take care of her. You'll find her in Westwood, Illinois. You and me have talked of selling the mine. Sell it; take my share and for it give Marion a half-interest in your ranch, the Arrow. If there is any left, put it in land in Dawes — that town is going to boom. Guard it for her, and marry her, Squint; she'll make you a good wife. Tell her I want her to marry you; she'll do it, for she always liked her "dad."

There was more, but Taylor read no further. He stuffed the envelope into a pocket and sat looking out of the window, regarding morosely the featureless landscape. After a time he grinned saturninely:

"Looks to me like a long chance, Larry," he mused. "Considered as a marrying proposition she don't seem to be enthusiastic over me. Now what in thunder is she doing out here, and why is that man Carrington with her — and where did she pick him up?"

There came no answer to these questions.

Reluctant, after the girl's mocking smile, to seem to intrude, Taylor sat in the smoking-compartment during the long afternoon, until the dusk began to descend — until through the curtains of the compartment he caught a glimpse of the girl and her companions returning from the dining-car. Then, after what he considered a decent interval, he emerged from the compartment, went to

the diner, ate heartily, and returned to the smoking-room.

He had met Larry Harlan about three years before. Harlan had appeared at the Arrow one morning, looking for a job. Taylor had hired him, not because he needed men, but because he thought Harlan needed work. A friendship had developed, and when one day Harlan had told Taylor about a mine he had discovered in the Sangre de Christo Mountains, some miles southwestward, offering Taylor a half-interest if the latter would help him get at the gold, Taylor had agreed.

They had found the mine, worked it, and had taken considerable gold out of it, when one day a huge rock had fallen on Harlan. Taylor had done what he could, rigging up a drag with which to take Harlan to town and a doctor, but Harlan had died before town could be reached.

That had been the extent of Taylor's friendship for the man. But he had followed Harlan's directions.

Sitting in the smoking-compartment, he again drew out Harlan's note to him and read further:

Marion will have considerable money, and I don't want no sneak to get hold of it — like the sneak that got hold of the money my wife had, that I saved. There's a lot of them around. If Marion is going to fall in love with one of that kind, I'd rather she wouldn't get what I leave — the man would get it away from her.

Use your own judgment, and I'll be satisfied.

It was not difficult for Taylor to divine what had happened to Harlan, nor was it difficult to understand that the man's distrust of other men amounted to an obsession. However, Taylor had no choice but to assume the trust and no course but to obey Harlan's wishes in the matter.

Taylor's trip eastward to Kansas City had been for the purpose of attending to his own financial interests, and incidentally to conclude the deal for the sale of the mine. He had deposited the money in his own name, but he intended—or had intended—after returning to the Arrow to make arrangements for his absence, to go to Westwood to find Marion Harlan. The presence of the girl on the train and the certain conviction that she was bound for Dawes made the trip to Westwood unnecessary.

For Taylor had no doubt that the girl was the daughter of Larry Harlan. That troublesome resemblance of hers to someone of his acquaintance bothered him no longer, for the girl was the living image of Larry Harlan.

Taylor had not anticipated the coming of Carrington into his scheme of things. For the first time since Larry Harlan's letter had come into his possession he realized that deep in his heart was a fugitive desire for the coming of the girl to the Arrow. He had liked Larry Harlan, and he had drawn mental pictures of what the daughter would be like; and, though she was not exactly as he had pictured her, she was near enough to the ideal he had

visualized. He wanted, now more than ever, to faithfully fulfil his obligation to Larry Harlan.

The presence of Carrington on the train, coupled with the inference that Carrington was a close friend of the girl's, irritated Taylor. For at the first glance he had felt a subtle antagonism for the man. Yet he was more disturbed over the mockery in the girl's eyes when she had looked directly at him when she had caught him listening to her talk with Carrington and the older man.

Still, Taylor was not the type of man who permits the imminence of discord to disturb his mental equanimity, and he grinned into the growing darkness of the plains with a grimly humorous twist to his lips that promised interesting developments should Carrington oppose him.

When he again looked out of the aperture in the curtains screening the smoking-compartment from the aisle he saw the porter pass, carrying bedclothing. Later he saw the porter returning, smilingly inspecting a bill. After an interval the porter stuck his head through the curtains and surveyed him with a flashing grin:

"Is you ready to retiah, boss?" he asked.

A quarter of an hour later Taylor was alone in his berth, gazing at his reflection in the glass while he undressed.

"You wouldn't have the nerve to think she is interested in you, would you—you homely son-of-a-gun?" he queried of his reflection. "Why, no, she ain't, of course," he added; "no woman could be interested in

you. You've been all day looking like a half-baked dude — and no woman is interested in dudes!"

Carefully removing the contents of the several pockets of the despised wearing apparel in which he had suffered for many days, he got into his nightclothes and rang for the porter. When the latter appeared with his huge grin, Taylor gave him the offensive clothing, bundled together to form a large ball.

"George," he said seriously, almost solemnly, "I'm tired of being a dude. Some day I may decide to be a dude; but not now. Take these duds and save them until I ask for them. If you offer them to me before I ask for them, I'll perforate you sure as hell!"

He produced a big Colt pistol from somewhere, and as the weapon glinted in the light the porter's eyes bulged and he backed away, gingerly holding the bundle of clothing.

"Yassir, boss — yassir! I shuah won't mention it till you does, boss!"

When the porter had gone, Taylor grinned into the glass.

"I sure have felt just what I looked," he said.

Then he got into his berth and dreamed all night of a girl whose mocking eyes seemed to say:

"Well, do you think you have profited by listening?"

"Why, sure," he retorted, in his dreams; "I've seen you, ain't I?"

CHAPTER III

THE SERPENT TRAIL

MARION HARLAN did not dream of Quinton Taylor, though her last waking thought was of him, and when she opened her eyes in the morning it was to see him as he had sat in the seat behind Carrington and her uncle, his eyes wide with interest, or astonishment—or some emotion that she could not define—looking directly at her.

She had been certain then, and still was certain that he had been feigning sleep, that he had been listening to the talk carried on between her uncle and Carrington.

Why had he listened?

That interrogation absorbed her thoughts as she dressed.

She had not meant to be interested in him, for she had, in her first glance at him, mentally decided that he was no more interesting than many another ill-dressed and uncouth westerner whom she had seen on the journey toward Dawes.

To be sure, she had seen signs of strength in him, mental and physical, but that had been when she looked at him coming toward her down the aisle. But even then

he had not interested her; her interest began when she noted his interest in the conversation of her traveling companions. And then she had noticed several things about him that had escaped her in other glances at him.

For one thing, despite the astonishment in his eyes, she had observed the cold keenness of them, the odd squint at the corners, where little wrinkles, splaying outward, indicated either deliberate impudence or concealed mirth. She was rather inclined to believe it the latter, though she would not have been surprised to discover the wrinkles to mean the former.

And then she had noted his mouth; his lips had been straight and firm; she had been sure they were set resolutely when she had surprised him looking at her. That had seemed to indicate that he had taken more than a passing interest in what he had overheard.

She speculated long over the incident, finally deciding that much would depend upon what he had overheard. There was only one way to determine that, and at breakfast in the dining-car she interrogated Carrington.

"Of course, you and uncle are going to Dawes on business, and I am merely tagging along to see if I can find any trace of my father. But have you any business secrets that might interest an eavesdropper? On a train, for instance—a train going toward Dawes?"

"What do you mean?" Carrington's eyes flashed as he leaned toward her.

"Have you and uncle talked business within hearing distance of a stranger?"

Carrington's face flushed; he exchanged a swift glance with the other man.

"You mean that clodhopper with the tight-fitting hand-me-down in the seat behind us — yesterday? He was asleep!"

"Then you did talk business — business secrets," smiled the girl. "I thought really big men commonly concealed their business secrets from the eager ears of outsiders."

She laughed aloud at Carrington's scowl, and then went on:

"I don't think the clodhopper was asleep. In fact, I rather think he was very wide awake. I wouldn't say for certain, but I *think* he was awake. You see, when I came back to talk with you he was sitting very straight, and his eyes were wide open.

"And I shall tell you something else," she went on. "During all the time he sat behind you, when you were talking, I watched him, he was pretending to sleep, for at times he opened his eyes and looked at you, and I am sure he was not thinking pleasant thoughts. And I don't believe he is a clodhopper. I think he amounts to something; and if you will look well at him you will see, too. When he was listening to you there was a look in his eyes that made me think of fighting." And then, after a momentary pause, she added slowly, "there isn't anything

wrong about the business you are going to transact out here—is there?”

“Wrong?” he laughed. “Oh, no! Business is business.” He leaned forward and gazed deliberately into her eyes, his own glowing significantly. “You don’t think, with me holding your good opinion—and always hoping to better it—that I would do anything to destroy it, Marion?”

The girl’s cheeks were suffused with faint color.

“You are assuming again, Mr. James J. Carrington. I don’t care for your subtle speeches. I like you best when you talk frankly; but I am not sure that I shall ever like you enough to marry you.”

She smiled at the scowl in his eyes, then looked speculatively at him. It should have been apparent to him that she had spoken the truth regarding her feeling for him.

The uncle knew she had spoken the truth, for she left them presently, and the car door had hardly closed behind her when Carrington said, smiling grimly:

“She’s a thoroughbred, Parsons. That’s why I like her. I’ll have her, too!”

“Careful,” grinned the other, smoothly. “If she ever discovers what a brute you are—” He made a gesture of finality.

“Brute! Bah! Parsons, you make me sick! I’ll take her when I want her! Why do you suppose I told her that

fairy tale about her father having been seen in this locality? To get her out here with me, of course—where there isn't a hell of a lot of law, and a man's will is the only thing that governs him. She won't have me, eh? Well, we'll see!"

Parsons smirked at the other. "Then you lied about Lawrence Harlan having been seen in this country?"

"Sure," admitted Carrington. "Why not?"

Parsons looked leeringly at Carrington. "Suppose I should tell her?"

Carrington glared at the older man. "You won't," he declared. "In the first place, you don't love her as an uncle should because she looks like Larry Harlan—and you hated Larry. Suppose I should tell her that you were the cause of the trouble between her parents; that you framed up on her mother, to get her to leave Larry? Why, you damned, two-faced gopher, she'd wither you!"

He grinned at the other and got up, turning, when he reached his feet, to see Quinton Taylor, standing beside a chair at the next table, just ready to sit down, but delaying to hear the remainder of the extraordinary conversation carried on between the two men.

Taylor had donned the garments he had discarded in Kansas City. A blue woolen shirt, open at the throat; corduroy trousers, the bottoms stuffed into the soft tops of high-heeled boots; a well-filled cartridge-belt, sagging at the right hip with the weight of a heavy pistol—

and a broad-brimmed felt hat, which a smiling waiter held for him—completed his attire.

Freshly shaved, his face glowed with the color that betokens perfect health; and just now his eyes were also glowing—but with frank disgust and dislike.

Carrington flushed darkly and stepped close to Taylor. Carrington's chin was thrust out belligerently; his eyes fairly danced with a rage that he could hardly restrain.

"Listening again, eh?" he said hoarsely. "You had your ears trained on us yesterday, in the Pullman, and now you are at it again. I've a notion to knock your damned head off!"

Taylor's eyelids flickered once, the little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepening a trifle. But his gaze was steady, and the blue of his eyes grew a trifle more steely.

"You've got a bigger notion not to, Mr. Man," he grinned. "You run a whole lot to talk."

He sat down, twisted around in the chair and faced the table, casting a humorous eye at the black waiter, and ignoring Carrington.

"I'll want a passable breakfast this morning, George," he said; "I'm powerful hungry."

He did not turn when Carrington went out, followed by Parsons.

The waiter hovered near him, grinning widely.

"I reckon you-all ain't none scary, boss!" he said, admiringly.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOLD-UP

AFTER breakfast — leaving a widely grinning waiter, who watched him admiringly — Taylor reentered the Pullman.

Stretching out in the upholstered seat, Taylor watched the flying landscape. But his thoughts were upon the two men he had overheard talking about the girl in the diner. Taylor made a grimace of disgust at the great world through which the train was speeding; and his feline grin when his thoughts dwelt definitely upon Carrington, indicated that the genial waiter had not erred greatly in saying Taylor was not “scary.”

Upon entering, Taylor had flashed a rapid glance into the car. He had seen Carrington and Parsons sitting together in one of the seats and, farther down, the girl, leaning back, was looking out of the window. Her back was toward Taylor. She had not seen him enter the car — and he was certain she had not seen him leave it to go to the diner. He had thought — as he had glanced at her as he went into the smoking-compartment — that, despite the girl’s seemingly affectionate manner toward Parsons, and her cordial treatment of the big man, her

manner indicated the presence of a certain restraint. And as he looked toward her, he wondered if Parsons or the big man had told her anything of the conversation in the diner in which he himself figured.

And now, looking out of the window, he decided that even if the men had told her, she would not betray her knowledge to him—unless it were to give him another scornful glance—the kind she threw at him when she saw him as he sat behind the two men when they had been talking of Dawes. Taylor reddened and gritted his teeth impotently; for he knew that if the two men had told her anything, they would have informed her, merely, that they had again caught him listening to them. And for that double offense, Taylor knew there would be no pardon from her.

Half an hour later, while still thinking of the girl and the men, Taylor felt the train slowing down. Peering as far ahead as he could by pressing his face against the glass of the window, Taylor saw the train was entering a big cut between some hills. It was a wild section, with a heavy growth of timber skirting the hills—on Taylor's side of the train—and running at a sharp angle toward the right-of-way came a small river.

Taylor recognized the place as Toban's Siding. He did not know how the spot had come by its name; nor did he know much about it except that there was a spur of track and a water-tank. And when the train began

to slow down he supposed the engineer had decided to stop to take on water. He found himself wondering, though, why that should be necessary, for he was certain the train had stopped for water a few miles back, while he had been in the dining-car.

The train was already late, and Taylor grinned as he settled farther back in the seat and drew a sigh of resignation. There was no accounting for the whims of an engineer, he supposed.

He felt the train come to a jerking stop; and then fell a silence. An instant later the silence was broken by two sharp reports, a distinct interval between them. Taylor sat erect, the smile leaving his face, and his lips setting grimly as the word "Hold-up" came from between them.

Marion Harlan also heard the two reports. Stories of train robberies — recollections of travelers' tales recurred in her brain as she sat, for the first tense instant following the reports, listening for other sounds. Her face grew a little pale, and a tremor ran over her; but she did not feel a bit like screaming — though in all the stories she had ever read, women always yielded to the hysteria of that moment in which a train-robber makes his presence known.

She was not frightened, though she was just a trifle nervous, and more than a trifle curious. So she pressed her cheek against the window-glass and looked forward.

What she saw caused her to draw back again, her curiosity satisfied. For on the side of the cut near the engine,

she had seen a man with a rifle — a masked man, tall and rough-looking — and it seemed to her that the weapon in his hands was menacing someone in the engine-cab.

She stiffened, looking quickly around the car. None of the passengers had moved. Carrington and Parsons were still sitting together in the seat. They were sitting erect, though, and she saw they, too, were curious. More, she saw that both men were pale, and that Carrington, the instant she turned, became active — bending over, apparently trying to hide something under a seat. That movement on Carrington's part was convincing, and the girl drew a deep breath.

While she was debating the wisdom of permitting her curiosity to drive her to the door nearest her to determine what had happened, the door burst open and a masked man appeared in the opening!

While she stared at him, he uttered the short, terse command:

“Hands up!”

She supposed that meant her, as well as the men in the car, and she complied, though with a resentful glare at the mask.

Daringly she turned her head and glanced back. Carrington had his hands up, too; and Parsons — and the tourist, and the other man. She did not see Taylor — though she wondered, on the instant, if he, too, would obey the train-robber's command.

She decided he would—any other course would have been foolhardy; though she could not help remembering that queer gleam in Taylor's eyes. That gleam, it had seemed to her, was a reflection of—not foolhardiness, but of sheer courage.

However, she had little time to speculate. The masked man advanced, a heavy gun in his right hand, its muzzle moving from side to side, menacing them all.

He halted when he had advanced to within a step of the girl.

"You guys set tight!" he ordered gruffly—in the manner of the train-robber of romance. "If you go to lettin' down your sky-hooks one little quiver, I bore you so fast an' plenty that you'll think you're a colander!" Then he turned the mask toward the girl; she could feel his eyes burning through it.

"Shell out, lady!" he commanded.

She stared straight back at the eye-slits in the mask, defiance glinting her own eyes.

"I haven't any money—or anything of value—to give you," she returned.

"You've got a pocketbook there—in your hand!" he said. "Fork it over!" He removed his hat, held it in his left hand, and extended it toward her. "Toss it in there!"

Hesitatingly, she obeyed, though not without a vindictive satisfaction in knowing that he would find little

in the purse to compensate him for his trouble. She could see his eyes gleam greedily as he still looked at her.

"Now that chain an' locket you've got around your neck!" he ordered. "Quick!" he added, savagely, as she stiffened and glared at him.

She did as she was bidden, though; for she had no doubt he would kill her—at least his manner indicated he would. And so she removed it, held it lingering in her hand for an instant, and then tossed it into the hat. She gulped as she did so, for the trinket had been given to her by her father before he left home to go on that pilgrimage from which he had never returned.

"That's all, eh?" snarled the man. "Well, I ain't swallowin' that! I'm goin' to search you!"

She believed she must have screamed at that. She knew she stood up, prepared to fight him if he attempted to carry out his threat; and once on her feet she looked backward.

Neither Carrington nor Parsons had moved—they were palely silent, watching, not offering to interfere. As for that, she knew that any sign of interference on the part of her friends would result in their instant death. But she did not know what they *should* do! Something must be done, for she could not permit the indignity the man threatened!

Still looking backward, she saw Taylor standing at the end of the car—where the partition of the smoking-

compartment extended outward. He held a gun in each hand. He had heard her scream, and on his face as the girl turned toward him, she saw a mirthless grin that made her shiver. She believed it must have been her gasp that caused the train-robber to look swiftly at Taylor.

Whatever had caused the man to look toward the rear of the car, he saw Taylor; and the girl saw him stiffen as his pistol roared in her ears. Taylor's pistols crashed at the same instant—twice—the reports almost together. Afterward she could not have told what surprised her the most—seeing the man at her side drop his pistol and lurch limply against a corner of the seat opposite her, and from there slide gently to the floor, grunting; or the spectacle of Taylor, arrayed in cowboy garb, emerging from the door of the smoking-compartment, the mirthless smile on his face, and his guns—he had used both—blazing forth death to the man who had threatened her.

Nor could she—afterward—have related what followed the sudden termination of the incident in the car. Salient memories stood out—the vivid and tragic recollection of chief incidents that occurred immediately; but she could not have even guessed how they happened.

She saw Taylor as he stood for an instant looking down at the man after he came running forward to where the other lay; and she saw Taylor leap for the front door of the car, vanish through it, and slam it after him.

For an instant after that there was silence, during

which she shuddered as she tried to keep her gaze from the thing that lay doubled oddly in the aisle.

And then she heard more shooting. It came from the direction of the engine—the staccato crashing of pistols; the shouts of men, their voices raised in anger.

Pressing her cheek against the window-pane, and looking forward toward the engine, she saw Taylor. With a gun in each hand, he was running down the little level between the track and the steep wall of the cut, toward her. She noted that his face still wore the mirthless grin that had been on it when he shot the train-robber in the car; though his eyes were alight with the lust of battle—that was all too plain—and she shivered. For Taylor, having killed one man, and grimly pursuing others, seemed to suggest the spirit of this grim, rugged country—the threat of death that seemed to linger on every hand.

She saw him snap a shot as he ran, bending far over to send the bullet under the car; she heard a pistol crash from the other side of the car; and then she saw Taylor go to his knees.

She gasped with horror and held to the window-sill, for she feared Taylor had been killed. But almost instantly she saw her error, for Taylor was on his hands and knees crawling when she could again concentrate her gaze; and she knew he was crawling under the car to catch the man who had shot from the other side.

Then Taylor disappeared, and she did not see him for a time. She heard shots, though; many of them; and then, after a great while, a silence. And during the silence she sat very still, her face white and her lips stiff, waiting.

The silence seemed to endure for an age; and then it was broken by the sound of voices, the opening of the door of the car, and the appearance of Taylor and some other men—several members of the train-crew; the express-messenger; the engineer, his right arm hanging limply—and two men, preceding the others, their hands bound, their faces sullen.

On Taylor's face was the grin that had been on it all along. The girl wondered at the man's marvelous self-control—for certainly during those moments of excitement and danger he must have been aware of the terrible risk he had been running. And then the thought struck her—she had not considered that phase of the situation before—that she *must* have screamed; that he had heard her, and had emerged from the smoking-room to protect her. She blushed, gratitude and a riot of other emotions overwhelming her, so that she leaned weakly back in the seat, succumbing to the inevitable reaction.

She did not look at Taylor again; she did not even see him as he walked toward the rear of the car, followed by the train-crew, and preceded by the two train-robbers he had captured.

But as the train-crew passed her, she heard one of them say:

"That guy's a whirlwind with a gun! Didn't do no hesitatin', did he?"

And again:

"Now, what do you suppose would make a guy jump in that way an' run a chance of gettin' plugged—plenty? Do you reckon he was just yearnin' fer trouble, or do you reckon they was somethin' else behind it?"

The girl might have answered, but she did not. She sat very still, comparing Carrington with this man who had plunged instantly into a desperate gun-fight to protect her. And she knew that Carrington would not have done as Taylor had done. And had Carrington seen her face just at that moment he would have understood that there was no possibility of him ever achieving the success of which he had dreamed.

She heard one of the men say that the two men were to be placed in the baggage-car until they reached Dawes; and then Carrington and Parsons came to where she sat.

They talked, but the girl did not hear them, for her thoughts were on the picture Taylor made when he appeared at the door of the smoking-compartment arrayed in his cowboy rigging, the grim smile on his face, his guns flaming death to the man who thought to take advantage of her helplessness.

CHAPTER V

THE UNEXPECTED

THE train pulled out again presently, and the water-tank and the cut were rapidly left in the rear. Taylor returned to the smoking-room and resumed his seat, and while the girl looked out of the window, some men of the train-crew removed the body of the train-robber and obliterated all traces of the fight. And Carrington and Parsons, noting the girl's abstractedness, again left her to herself.

It had been the girl's first glimpse of a man in cowboy raiment, and, as she reflected, she knew she might have known Taylor was an unusual man. However, she knew it now.

Cursory glances at drawings she had seen made her familiar with the type, but the cowboys of those drawings had been magnificently arrayed in leather *chaparajos*, usually fringed with spangles; and with long-roweled spurs; magnificent wide brims—also bespangled, and various other articles of personal adornment, bewildering and awe inspiring.

But this man, though undoubtedly a cow-puncher, was minus the magnificent raiment of the drawings. And,

paradoxical as it may seem, the absence of any magnificent trappings made *him* seem magnificent.

But she was not so sure that it was the lack of those things that gave her that impression. He did not *bulge* in his cowboy clothing; it fitted him perfectly. She was sure it was he who gave magnificence to the clothing. Anyway, she was certain he was magnificent, and her eyes glowed. She knew, now that she had seen him in clothing to which he was accustomed, and which he knew how to wear, that she would have been more interested in him yesterday had he appeared before her arrayed as he was at this moment.

He had shown himself capable, self-reliant, confident. She would have given him her entire admiration had it not been for the knowledge that she had caught him eavesdropping. That action had almost damned him in her estimation—it would have completely and irrevocably condemned him had it not been for her recollection of the stern, almost savage interest she had seen in his eyes while he had been listening to Carrington and Parsons.

She knew because of that expression that Carrington and Parsons had been discussing something in which he took a personal interest. She had not said so much to Carrington, but her instinct told her, warned her, gave her a presentiment of impending trouble. That was what she had meant when she had told Carrington she had seen *fighting* in Taylor's eyes.

Taylor confined himself to the smoking-compartment. The negro porter, with pleasing memories of generous tips and a grimmer memory to exact his worship, hung around him, eager to serve him, and to engage him in conversation; once he grinningly mentioned the incident of the cast-off clothing of the night before.

"I ain't mentionin' it, boss — not at all! I ain't givin' you them duds till you ast for them. You done took me by s'prise, boss — you shuah did. I might' near caved when you shoved that gun under ma nose — I shuah did, boss. I don't want to have nothin' to do with your gun, boss — I shuah don't. She'd go 'pop,' an' I wouldn't be heah no more!

"I didn't reco'nize you in them heathen clo's you had on yesterday, boss; but I minds you with them duds on. I knows you; you're 'Squint' Taylor, of Dawes. I've seen you on that big black hoss of yourn, a prancin' an' a prancin' through town — more'n once I've seen you. But I didn't know you in them heathen clo's yesterday, boss — 'deed I didn't!"

Later the porter slipped into the compartment. For a minute or two he fussed around the room, setting things to order, meanwhile chuckling to himself. Occasionally he would cease his activities long enough to slap a knee with the palm of a hand, with which movement he would seem to be convulsed with merriment, and then he would resume work, chuckling audibly.

For a time Taylor took no notice of his antics, but they assailed his consciousness presently, and finally he asked:

"What's eating you, George?"

The query was evidently just what "George" had been waiting for. For now he turned and looked at Taylor, his face solemn, but a white gleam of mirth in his eyes belying the solemnity.

"Tips is comin' easy for George this mornin'," he said; "they shuah is. No trouble at all. If a man wants to get tips all he has to be is a dictionary—he, he, he!"

"So you're a dictionary, eh? Well, explain the meaning of this." And he tossed a silver dollar to the other.

The dollar in hand, George tilted his head sidewise at Taylor.

"How on earth you know I got somethin' to tell you?"

"How do I know I've got two hands?"

"By lookin' at them, boss."

"Well, that's how I know you've got something to tell me—by looking at you."

The porter chuckled. "I reckon it's worth a dollar to have a young lady interested in you," he told himself in a confidential voice, without looking at Taylor; "yas-sir, it's sure worth a dollar." He slapped his knee delightedly. "That young lady a heap interested in you, 'pears like. While ago she pens me in a corner of the platform. 'Porter, who's that man in the smoking-compartment—that cowboy? What's his name, an' where

does he live?' I hesitates, 'cause I didn't want to betray no secrets—an' scratch my haid. Then she pop half a dollar in my hand, an' I tole her you are Squint Taylor, an' that you own the Arrow ranch, not far from Dawes. 'An' she thank me an' go away, grinnin'."

"And the young lady, George; do you know her name?"

"Them men she's travelin' with calls her Marion, boss."

He peered intently at Taylor for signs of interest. He saw no such signs, and after a while, noting that Taylor seemed preoccupied, and was evidently no longer aware of his presence, he slipped out noiselessly.

At nine thirty, Taylor, looking out of the car window, noted that the country was growing familiar. Fifteen minutes later the porter stuck his head in between the curtains, saw that Taylor was still absorbed, and withdrew. At nine fifty-five the porter entered the compartment.

"We'll be in Dawes in five minutes, boss," he said. "I've toted your baggage to the door."

The porter withdrew, and a little later Taylor got up and went out into the aisle. At the far end of the car, near the door, he saw Marion Harlan, Parsons, and Carrington.

He did not want to meet them again after what had occurred in the diner, and he cast a glance toward the door behind him, hoping that the porter had carried his

baggage to that end of the car. But the platform was empty—his suitcase was at the other end.

He slipped into a seat on the side of the train that would presently disclose to him a view of Dawes's depot, and of Dawes itself, leaned an elbow on the window-sill, and waited. Apparently the three persons at the other end of the car paid no attention to him, but glancing sidelong once he saw the girl throw an interested glance at him.

And then the air-brakes hissed; he felt the train slowing down, and he got up and walked slowly toward the girl and her companions. At about the same instant she and the others began to move toward the door; so that when the train came to a stop they were on the car platform by the time Taylor reached the door. And by the time he stepped out upon the car platform the girl and her friends were on the station platform, their baggage piled at their feet.

Dawes's depot was merely a roofless platform; and there was no shelter from the glaring white sun that flooded it. The change from the subdued light of the coach to the shimmering, blinding glare of the sun on the wooden planks of the platform affected Taylor's eyes, and he was forced to look downward as he alighted. And then, not looking up, he went to the baggage-car and pulled his two prisoners out.

Looking up as he walked down the platform with the two men, he saw a transformed Dawes.

The little, frame station building had been a red, dingy blot beside the glistening rails that paralleled the town. It was now gaily draped with bunting—red, white, and blue—which he recognized as having been used on the occasion of the town's anniversary celebration.

A big American flag topped the ridge of the station; other flags projected from various angles of the frame.

Most of the town's other buildings were replicas of the station in the matter of decorations—festoons of bunting ran here and there from building to building; broad bands of it were stretched across the fronts of other buildings; gay loops of it crossed the street, suspended to form triumphal arches; flags, wreaths of laurel, Japanese lanterns, and other paraphernalia of the decorator's art were everywhere.

Down the street near the Castle Hotel, Taylor saw transparencies, but he could not make out the words on them.

He grinned, for certainly the victor of yesterday's election was outdoing himself.

He looked into the face of a man who stood near him on the platform—who answered his grin.

"Our new mayor is celebrating in style, eh?" he said.

"Right!" declared the man.

He was about to ask the man which candidate had been victorious—though he was certain it was Neil Norton—

when he saw Marion Harlan, standing a little distance from him, smiling at him.

It was a broad, impersonal smile, such as one citizen of a town might exchange with another when both are confronted with the visible evidences of political victory; and Taylor responded to it with one equally impersonal. Whereat the girl's smile faded, and her gaze, still upon Taylor, became speculative. Its quality told Taylor that he should not presume upon the smile.

Taylor had no intention of presuming anything. Not even the porter's story of the girl's interest in him had affected him to the extent of fatuous imaginings. A woman's curiosity, he supposed, had led her to inquire about him. He expected she rarely saw men arrayed as he was — and as he had been arrayed the day before.

The girl's gaze went from Taylor to the street in the immediate vicinity of the station, and for the first time since alighting on the platform Taylor saw a mass of people near him.

Looking sharply at them, he saw many faces in the mass that he knew. They all seemed to be looking at him and, with the suddenness of a stroke came to him the consciousness that there was no sound — that silence, deep and unusual, reigned in Dawes. The train, usually merely stopping at the station and then resuming its trip, was still standing motionless behind him. With a sidelong glance he saw the train-crew standing near the steps of

the cars, looking at him. The porter and the waiter with whose faces he was familiar, were grinning at him.

Taylor felt that his own grin, as he gazed around at the faces that were all turned toward him, was vacuous and foolish. He *felt* foolish. For he knew something had attracted the attention of all these people to him, and he had not the slightest idea what it was. For an instant he feared that through some mental lapse he had forgotten to remove his "dude" clothing; and he looked down at his trousers and felt of his shirt, to reassure himself. And he gravely and intently looked at his prisoners, wondering if by any chance some practical joker of the town had arranged the train robbery for his special benefit. If that were the explanation it had been grim hoax—for two men had been killed in the fight.

Looking up again, he saw that the grins on the faces of the people around him had grown broader—and several loud guffaws of laughter reached his ears. He looked at Marion Harlan, and saw a puzzled expression on her face. Carrington, too, was looking at him, and Parsons, whose smile was a smirk of perplexity.

Taylor reddened with embarrassment. A resentment that grew swiftly to an angry intolerance, seized him. He straightened, squared his shoulders, thrust out his chin, and shoving his prisoners before him, took several long strides across the station platform.

This movement brought him close to Marion Harlan

and her friends, and his further progress was barred by a man who placed a hand against his chest.

This man, too, was grinning. He seized Taylor's shoulders with both hands and looked into his face, the grin on his own broad and expanding.

"Welcome home—you old son-of-a-gun!" said the man.

His grin was infectious and Taylor answered it, dropping his suitcase and looking the other straight in the eyes.

"Norton," he said, "what in hell is the cause of all this staring at me? Can't a man leave town for a few days and come back without everybody looking at him as though he were a curiosity?"

Norton—a tall, slender, sinewy man with broad shoulders—laughed aloud and deliberately winked at several interested citizens who had followed Taylor's progress across the platform, and who now stood near him, grinning.

"You are a curiosity, man. You're the first mayor of this man's town! Lordy," he said to the surrounding faces, "he hasn't tumbled to it yet!"

The color left Taylor's face; he stared hard at Norton; he gazed in bewilderment at the faces near him.

"Mayor?" he said. "Why, good Lord, man, I wasn't here yesterday!"

"But your friends were!" yelped the delighted Norton.

He raised his voice, so that it reached far into the crowd on the street:

"He's sort of fussed up, boys; this honor being conferred on him so sudden; but give him time and he'll talk your heads off!" He leaned over to Taylor and whispered in his ear.

"Grin, man, for God's sake! Don't stand there like a wooden man; they'll think you don't appreciate it! It's the first time I ever saw you lose your nerve. Buck up, man; why, they simply swamped Danforth; wiped him clean off the map!"

Norton was whispering more into Taylor's ear, but Taylor could not follow the sequence of it, nor get a coherent meaning out of it. He even doubted that he heard Norton. He straightened, and looked around at the crowd that now was pressing in on him, and for the first time in his life he knew the mental panic and the physical sickness that overtakes the man who for the first time faces an audience whose eyes are focused on him.

For a bag of gold as big as the mountains that loomed over the distant southern horizon he could not have said a word to the crowd. But he did succeed in grinning at the faces around him, and at that the crowd yelled.

And just before the crowd closed in on him and he began to shake hands with his delighted supporters, he glanced at Marion Harlan. She was looking at him with

a certain sober interest, though he was sure that back in her eyes was a sort of humorous malice—which had, however, a softening quality of admiration and, perhaps, gratitude.

His gaze went from her to Carrington. The big man was watching him with a veiled sneer which, when he met Taylor's eyes, grew open and unmistakable.

Taylor grinned broadly at him, for now it occurred to him that he would be able to thwart Carrington's designs of "getting hold of the reins." His grin at Carrington was a silent challenge, and so the other interpreted it, for his sneer grew positively venomous.

The girl caught the exchange of glances between them, for Taylor heard her say to Parsons, just before the noise of the crowd drowned her voice:

"Now I *know* he overheard you!"

Meanwhile, the two prisoners were standing near Taylor. Taylor had almost forgotten them. He was reminded of their presence when he saw Keats, the sheriff, standing near him. At just the instant Taylor looked at Keats, the latter was critically watching the prisoners.

Keats and Taylor had had many differences of opinion, for the sheriff's official actions had not merited nor received Taylor's approval. Taylor's attitude toward the man had always been that of good-natured banter, despite the disgust he felt for the man. And now, pursuing his customary attitude, Taylor called to him:

"Specimens, eh! Picked them up at Toban's this morning. They yearned to hold up the train. There were four, all together, but we had to put two out of business. I came pretty near forgetting them. If I hadn't seen you just now, maybe I would have walked right off and left them here. Take them to jail, Keats."

Keats advanced. He met Taylor's eyes and his lips curved with a sneer:

"Pullin' off a little grand-stand play, eh! Well, it's a mighty clever idea. First you get elected mayor, an' then you come in here, draggin' along a couple of mean-lookin' hombres, an' say they've tried to hold up the train at Toban's. It sounds mighty fishy to me!"

Taylor laughed. He heard a chuckle behind him, and he turned, to see Carrington grinning significantly at Keats. Taylor's eyes chilled as his gaze went from one man to the other, for the exchange of glances told him that between the men there was a common interest, which would link them together against him. And in the dead silence that followed Keats's words, Taylor drawled, grinning coldly:

"Meaning that I'm a liar, Keats?"

His voice was gentle, and his shoulders seemed to droop a little as though in his mind was a desire to placate Keats. But there were men in Dawes who had seen Taylor work his guns, and these held their breath and began to shove backward. That slow, drooping of

Taylor's shoulders was a danger signal, a silent warning that Taylor was ready for action, swift and violent.

And faces around Taylor whitened as the man stood there facing Keats, his shoulders drooping still lower, the smile on his face becoming one of cold, grim mockery.

The discomfiture of Keats was apparent. Indecision and fear were in the set of his head—bowed a little; and a dread reluctance was in his shifting eyes and the pasty-white color of his face. It was plain that Keats had overplayed; he had not intended to arouse the latent tiger in Taylor; he had meant merely to embarrass him.

"Meaning that I'm a liar, Keats?"

Again Taylor's voice was gentle, though this time it carried a subtle taunt.

Desperately harried, Keats licked his hot lips and cast a sullen glance around at the crowd. Then his gaze went to Taylor's face, and he drew a slow breath.

"I reckon I wasn't meanin' just that," he said.

"Of course," smiled Taylor; "that's no way for a sheriff to act. Take them in, Keats," he added, waving a hand at the prisoners; "it's been so long since the sheriff of this county arrested a man that the jail's gettin' tired, yawning for somebody to get into it."

He turned his back on Keats and looked straight at Carrington:

"Have you got any ideas along the sheriff's line?" he asked.

Carrington flushed and his lips went into a sullen pout. He did not speak, merely shaking his head, negatively.

Keats's glance at Taylor was malignant with hate; and Carrington's sullen, venomous look was not unnoticed by the crowd. Keats stepped forward and seized the two prisoners, hustling them away, muttering profanely.

And then Taylor was led away by Norton and a committee of citizens, leaving Carrington, the girl and Parsons alone on the platform.

"Looks like we're going to have trouble lining things up," remarked Parsons. "Danforth ——"

"You shut up!" snapped Carrington. "Danforth's an ass and so are you!"

CHAPTER VI

A MAN MAKES PLANS

WITHIN an hour after his arrival in Dawes, Carrington was sitting in the big front room of his suite in the Castle Hotel, inspecting the town.

A bay window projected over the sidewalk, and from a big leather chair placed almost in the center of the bay between two windows and facing a third, at the front, Carrington had a remarkably good view of the town.

Dawes was a thriving center of activity, with reasons for its prosperity. Walking toward the Castle from the railroad station, Carrington had caught a glimpse of the big dam blocking the constricted neck of a wide basin west of the town—and farther westward stretched a vast agricultural section, level as a floor, with a carpet of green slumbering in the white sunlight, and dotted with young trees that seemed almost ready to bear.

There were many small buildings on the big level, some tenthouses, and straight through the level was a wide, sparkling stream of water, with other and smaller streams intersecting it. These streams were irrigation ditches, and the moisture in them was giving life to a vast section of country that had previously been arid and dead.

But Carrington's interest had not been so much for the land as for the method of irrigation. To be sure, he had not stopped long to look, but he had comprehended the system at a glance. There were locks and flumes and water-gates, and plenty of water. But the irrigation company had not completed its system. Carrington intended to complete it.

Dawes was two years old, and it had the appearance of having been hastily constructed. Its buildings were mostly of frame—even the Castle, large and pretentious, and the town's aristocrat of hostelrys, was of frame. Carrington smiled, for later, when he had got himself established, he intended to introduce an innovation in building material.

The courthouse was a frame structure. It was directly across the street from the Castle, and Carrington could look into its windows and see some men at work inside at desks. He had no interest in the post office, for that was of the national government—and yet, perhaps, after a while he might take some interest in that.

For Carrington's vision, though selfish, was broad. A multitude of men of the Carrington type have taken bold positions in the eternal battle for progress, and all have contributed something toward the ultimate ideal. And not all have been scoundrels.

Carrington's vision, however, was blurred by the mote of greed. Dawes was flourishing; he intended to mod-

ernize it, but in the process of modernization he intended to be the chief recipient of the material profits.

Carrington had washed, shaved himself, and changed his clothes; and as he sat in the big leather chair in the bay, overlooking the street, he looked smooth, sleek, and capable.

He had seemed massive in the Pullman, wearing a traveling suit of some light material, and his corpulent waist-line had been somewhat accentuated.

The blue serge suit he wore now made a startling change in his appearance. It made his shoulders seem broader; it made the wide, swelling arch of his chest more pronounced, and in inverse ratio it contracted the corpulent waist-line—almost eliminating it.

Carrington looked to be what he was—a big, virile, magnetic giant of a man in perfect health.

He had not been sitting in the leather chair for more than fifteen minutes when there came a knock on a door behind him.

“Come!” he commanded.

A tall man entered, closed the door behind him and with hat in hand stood looking at Carrington with a half-smile which might have been slightly diffident, or impudent or defiant—it was puzzling.

Carrington had twisted in his chair to get a glimpse of his visitor; he now grunted, resumed his former position and said, gruffly:

"Hello, Danforth!"

Danforth stepped over to the bay, and without invitation drew up a chair and seated himself near Carrington.

Danforth was slender, big-framed, and sinewy. His shoulders were broad and his waist slim. There was a stubborn thrust to his chin; his nose was a trifle too long to perfectly fit his face; his mouth a little too big, and the lips too thin. The nose had a slight droop that made one think of selfishness and greed, and the thin lips, with a downward swerve at the corners, suggested cruelty.

These defects, however, were not prominent, for they were offset by a really distinguished head with a mass of short, curly hair that ruffled attractively under the brim of the felt hat he wore.

The hat was in his right hand, now, but it had left its impress on his hair, and as he sat down he ran his free hand through it. Danforth knew where his attractions were.

He grinned shallowly at Carrington when the latter turned and looked at him.

He cleared his throat. "I suppose you've heard about it?"

"I couldn't help hearing." Carrington scowled at the other. "What in hell was wrong? We send you out here, give you more than a year's time and all the money you want—which has been plenty—and then you lose. What in the devil was the matter?"

"Too much Taylor," smirked the other.

"But what else?"

"Nothing else — just Taylor."

Carrington exclaimed profanely.

"Why, the man didn't even know he was a candidate! He was on the train I came in on!"

"It was Neil Norton's scheme," explained Danforth. "I had *him* beaten to a frazzle. I suppose he knew it. Two days before election he suddenly withdrew his name and substituted Taylor's. You know what happened. He licked me two to one. He was too popular for me — damn him!"

"Norton owns a newspaper here — the only one in the county — the *Eagle*."

"Why didn't you buy him?"

Danforth grinned sarcastically: "I didn't feel that reckless."

"Honest, eh?"

Carrington rested his chin in the palm of his right hand and scowled into the street. He was convinced that Danforth had done everything he could to win the election, and he was bitterly chagrined over the result. But that result was not the dominating thought in his mind. He kept seeing Taylor as the latter had stood on the station platform, stunned with surprise over the knowledge that he had been so signally honored by the people of Dawes.

And Carrington had seen Marion Harlan's glances at the man; he had been aware of the admiring smile she had given Taylor; and bitter passion gripped Carrington at the recollection of the smile.

More—he had seen Taylor's face when the girl had smiled. The smile had thrilled Taylor—it had held promise for him, and Carrington knew it.

Carrington continued to stare out into the street. Danforth watched him furtively, in silence.

At last, not opening his lips, Carrington spoke:

"Tell me about this man, Taylor."

"Taylor owns the Arrow ranch, in the basin south of here. His ranch covers about twenty thousand acres. He has a clear title.

"According to report, he employs about thirty men. They are holy terrors—that is, they are what is called 'hard cases,' though they are not outlaws by any means. Just a devil-may-care bunch that raises hell when it strikes town. They swear by Taylor."

So far as Carrington could see, everybody in Dawes swore by Taylor. Carrington grimaced.

"That isn't what I want to know," he flared. "How long has he been here; what kind of a fellow is he?"

"Taylor owned the Arrow before Dawes was founded. When the railroad came through it brought with it some land-sharks that tried to frame up on the ranch-owners in the vicinity. It was a slick scheme, they tell me. They

had clouded every title, and figured to grab the whole county, it seems.

"Taylor went after them. People I've talked with here say it was a dandy shindy while it lasted. The land-grabbers brought the courts in, and a crooked judge. Taylor fought them, crooked judge and all, to a bite-the-dust finish. Toward the end it was a free-for-all—and the land-grabbers were chased out of the county.

"Naturally, the folks around here think a lot of Taylor for the part he played in the deal. Besides that, he's a man that makes friends quickly—and holds them."

"Has Taylor any interests besides his ranch?"

"A share in the water company, I believe. He owns some land in town; and he is usually on all the public committees here."

"About thirty, isn't he?"

"Twenty-eight."

Carrington looked at the other with a sidelong, sneering grin:

"Have any ladies come into his young life?"

Danforth snickered. "You've got me—I hadn't inquired. He doesn't seem to be much of a ladies' man, though, I take it. Doesn't seem to have time to monkey with them."

"H-m!" Carrington's lips went into a pout as he stared straight ahead of him.

Danforth at last broke a long silence with:

"Well, we got licked, all right. What's going to happen now? Are you going to quit?"

"Quit?" Carrington snapped the word at the other, his eyes flaming with rage. Then he laughed, mirthlessly, resuming: "This defeat was unexpected; I wasn't set for it. But it won't alter things—very much. I'll have to shake a leg, that's all. What time does the next train leave here for the capital?"

"At two o'clock this afternoon." Danforth's eyes widened as he looked at Carrington. The curiosity in his glance caused Carrington to laugh shortly.

"You don't mean that the governor is in this thing?" said Danforth.

"Why not?" demanded Carrington. "Bah! Do you think I came in with my eyes closed!"

There was a new light in Danforth's eyes—the flame of renewed hope.

"Then we've still got a chance," he declared.

Carrington laughed. "A too-popular mayor is not a good thing for a town," he said significantly.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

MARION HARLAN and her uncle, Elam Parsons, did not accompany Carrington to the Castle Hotel. By telegraph, through Danforth, Carrington had bought a house near Dawes, and shortly after Quinton Taylor left the station platform accompanied by his friends and admirers, Marion and her uncle were in a buckboard riding toward the place that, henceforth, was to be their home.

For that question had been settled before the party left Westwood. Parsons had declared his future activities were to be centered in Dawes, that he had no further interests to keep him in Westwood, and that he intended to make his home in Dawes.

Certainly Marion had few interests in the town that had been the scene of the domestic tragedy that had left her parentless. She was glad to get away. For though she had not been to blame for what had happened, she was painfully conscious of the stares that followed her everywhere, and aware of the morbid curiosity with which her neighbors regarded her. Also—through the medium of certain of her “friends,” she had become

cognizant of speculative whisperings, such as: "To think of being brought up like that? Do you think she will be like her mother?" Or—"What's bred in the bone, *et cetera*."

Perhaps these good people did not mean to be unkind; certainly the crimson stains that colored the girl's cheeks when she passed them should have won their charity and their silence.

There was nothing in Westwood for her; and so she was glad to get away. And the trip westward toward Dawes opened a new vista of life to her. She was leaving the old and the tragic and adventuring into the new and promising, where she could face life without the onus of a shame that had not been hers.

Before she was half way to Dawes she had forgotten Westwood and its wagging tongues. She alone, of all the passengers in the Pullman, had not been aware of the heat and the discomfort. She had loved every foot of the great prairie land that, green and beautiful, had flashed past the car window; she had gazed with eager, interested eyes into the far reaches of the desert through which she had passed, filling her soul with the mystic beauty of this new world, reveling in its vastness and in the atmosphere of calm that seemed to engulf it.

Dawes had not disappointed her; on the contrary, she loved it at first sight. For though Dawes was new and crude, it looked rugged and honest—and rather too

busy to hesitate for the purpose of indulging in gossip — idle or otherwise. Dawes, she was certain, was occupying itself with progress — a thing that, long since, Westwood had forgotten.

Five minutes after she had entered the buckboard, the spirit of this new world had seized upon the girl and she was athrob and atingle with the joy of it. It filled her veins; it made her cheeks flame and her eyes dance. And the strange aroma — the pungent breath of the sage, borne to her on the slight breeze — she drew into her lungs with great long breaths that seemed to intoxicate her.

“Oh,” she exclaimed delightedly, “isn’t it great! Oh, I love it!”

Elam Parsons grinned at her — the habitual smirk with which he recognized all emotion not his own.

“It *does* look like a good field for business,” he conceded.

The girl looked at him quickly, divined the sordidness of his thoughts, and puckered her brows in a frown. And thereafter she enjoyed the esthetic beauties of her world without seeking confirmation from her uncle.

Her delight grew as the journey to the new home progressed. She saw the fertile farming country stretching far in the big section of country beyond the water-filled basin; her eyes glowed as the irrigation ditches, with their locks and gates, came under her observation; and

she sat silent, awed by the mightiness of it all — the tall, majestic mountains looming somberly many miles distant behind a glowing mist — like a rose veil or a gauze curtain lowered to partly conceal the mystic beauty of them.

Intervening were hills and flats and draws and valleys, and miles and miles of level grass land, green and peaceful in the shimmering sunlight that came from somewhere near the center of the big, pale-blue inverted bowl of sky; she caught the silvery glitter of a river that wound its way through the country like a monstrous serpent; she saw dark blotches, miles long, which she knew were forests, for she could see the spires of trees thrusting upward. But from where she rode the trees seemed to be no larger than bushes.

Looking backward, she could see Dawes. Already the buckboard had traveled two or three miles, but the town seemed near, and she had quite a shock when she looked back at it and saw the buildings, mere huddled shanties, spoiling the beauty of her picture.

A mile or so farther — four miles altogether, Parsons told her — and they came in sight of a house. She had difficulty restraining her delight when they climbed out of the buckboard and Parsons told her the place was to be their permanent home. For it was such a house as she had longed to live in all the days of her life.

The first impression it gave her was that of spacious-

ness. For though only one story in height, the house contained many rooms. Those, however, she saw later.

The exterior was what intrigued her interest at first glance. So far as she knew, it was the only brick building in the country. She had seen none such in Dawes.

There was a big porch across the front; the windows were large; there were vines and plants thriving in the shade from some big cottonwood trees near by — in fact, the house seemed to have been built in a grove of the giant trees; there were several outhouses, one of which had chickens in an enclosure near it; there was a garden, well-kept; and the girl saw that back of the house ran a little stream which flowed sharply downward, later to tumble into the big basin far below the irrigation dam.

While Parsons was superintending the unloading of the buckboard, Marion explored the house. It was completely furnished, and her eyes glowed with pleasure as she inspected it. And when Parsons and the driver were carrying the baggage in she was outside the house, standing at the edge of a butte whose precipitous walls descended sharply to the floor of the irrigation basin, two or three hundred feet below. She could no longer see the cultivated level, with its irrigation ditches, but she could see the big dam, a mile or so up the valley toward Dawes, with the water creeping over it, and the big valley itself, slumbering in the pure, white light of the morning.

She went inside, slightly awed, and Parsons, noting her excitement, smirked at her. She left him and went to her room. Emerging later she discovered that Parsons was not in the house. She saw him, however, at a distance, looking out into the valley.

And then, in the kitchen, Marion came upon the housekeeper, a negro woman of uncertain age. Parsons had not told her there was to be a housekeeper.

The negro woman grinned broadly at her astonishment.

"Lawsey, ma'am; you jes' got to have a housekeeper, I reckon! How you ever git along without a housekeeper? You're too fine an' dainty to keep house you'self!"

The woman's name, the latter told her, was Martha, and there was honest delight—and, it seemed to Marion, downright relief in her eyes when she looked at the new mistress.

"You ain't got no 'past,' that's certain, honey," she declared, with a delighted smile. "The woman that lived here befo' had a past, honey. A man named Huggins lived in this house, an' she said she's his wife. Wife! Lawsey! No man has a wife like that! She had a past, that woman, an' mebbe a present, too—he, he, he!"

"He was the man what put the railroad through here, honey. I done hear the woman say—her name was Blanche, honey—that Huggins was one of them ultra rich. But whatever it was that ailed him, honey, didn't help his looks none. Pig-eye, I used to call him, when

I'se mad at him — which was mostly all the time — he, he, he!”

The girl's face whitened. Was she never to escape the atmosphere she loathed? She shuddered and Martha patted her sympathetically on the shoulder.

“There, there, honey; you ain't 'sponsible for other folks' affairs. Jes' you hold you' head up an' go about you' business. Nobody say anything to you because you' livin' here.”

But Martha's words neither comforted nor consoled the girl. She went again to her room and sat for a long time, looking out of a window. For now all the cheer had gone out of the house; the rooms looked dull and dreary — and empty, as of something gone out of them.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING "SQUINT"

MARION HARLAN had responded eagerly to Carrington's fabrication regarding the rumor of Lawrence Harlan's presence in Dawes. Carrington's reference to her father's sojourn in the town had been vague—he merely told her that a rumor had reached him—a man's word, without details—and she had accepted it at its face value. She was impatient to run the rumor down, to personally satisfy herself, and she believed Carrington.

But she spent a fruitless week interrogating people in Dawes. She had gone to the courthouse, there to pass long hours searching the records—and had found nothing. Then, systematically, she had gone from store to store—making small purchases and quizzing everyone she came in contact with. None had known a man named Harlan; it seemed that not one person in Dawes had ever heard of him.

Parsons had returned to town in the buckboard shortly after noon on the day of their arrival at the new house, and she had not seen him again until the following morning. Then he had told her that Carrington had gone

away—he did not know where. Carrington would not return for a week or two, he inferred.

Parsons had bought some horses. A little bay, short-coupled but wiry, belonged to her, Parsons said—it was a present from Carrington.

She hesitated to accept the horse; but the little animal won her regard by his affectionate mannerisms, and at the end of a day of doubt and indecision she accepted him.

She had ridden horses in Westwood—bareback when no one had been looking, and with a side-saddle at other times—but she discovered no side-saddle in Dawes. However, she did encounter no difficulty in unearthing a riding-habit with a divided skirt, and though she got into that with a pulse of trepidation and embarrassment, she soon discovered it to be most comfortable and convenient.

And Dawes did not stare at her because she rode "straddle." At first she was fearful, and watched Dawes's citizens furtively; but when she saw that she attracted no attention other than would be attracted by any good-looking young woman in more conventional attire, she felt more at ease. But she could not help thinking about the sanctimonious inhabitants of Westwood. Would they not have declared their kindly predictions vindicated had they been permitted to see her? She could almost hear the chorus of "I-told-you-so's"—they rang in her ears over a distance of many hundreds of miles!

But the spirit of the young, unfettered country had got into her soul, and she went her way unmindful of Westwood's opinions.

For three days she continued her search for tidings of her father, eager and hopeful; and then for the remainder of the week she did her searching mechanically, doggedly, with a presentiment of failure to harass her.

And then one morning, when she was standing beside her horse near the stable door, ready to mount and fully determined to pursue the Carrington rumor to the end, the word she sought was brought to her.

She saw a horseman coming toward her from the direction of Dawes. He was not Parsons — for the rider was short and broad; and besides, Parsons was spending most of his time in Dawes.

The girl watched the rider, assured, as he came nearer, that he was a stranger; and when he turned his horse toward her, and she saw he *was* a stranger, she leaned close and whispered to her own animal:

“Oh, Billy; what if it *should* be!”

An instant later she was watching the stranger dismount within a few feet of where she was standing.

He was short and stocky, and undeniably Irish. He was far past middle age, as his gray hair and seamed wrinkles of his face indicated; but there was the light of a youthful spirit and good-nature in his eyes that squinted at the girl with a quizzical interest.

With the bridle-rein in the crook of his elbow and his hat in his hand, he bowed elaborately to the girl.

"Would ye be Miss Harlan, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes," she breathed, her face alight with eagerness, for now since the man had spoken her name the presentiment of news grew stronger.

The man's face flashed into a wide, delighted grin and he reached out a hand, into which she placed one of hers, hardly knowing that she did it.

"Me name's Ben Mullarky, ma'am. I've got a little shack down on the Rabbit-Ear—which is a crick, for all the name some locoed ignoramus give it. You c'ud see the shack from here, ma'am—if ye'd look sharp."

He pointed out a spot to her—a wooded section far out in the big level country southward, beside the river—and she saw the roof of a building near the edge of the timber.

"That's me shack," offered Mullarky. "Me ol' woman an' meself owns her—an' a quarter-section—all proved. We call it seven miles from the shack to Dawes. That'd make it about three from here."

"Yes, yes," said the girl eagerly.

He grinned at her. "Comin' in to town this mornin' for some knickknacks for me ol' woman, I hear from Coleman—who keeps a store—that there's a fine-lookin' girl named Harlan searchin' the country for news of her father, Larry Harlan. I knowed him, ma'am."

"You did? Oh, how wonderful!" She stood erect, breathing fast, her eyes glowing with mingled joy and impatience. She had not caught the significance of Mullarky's picturesque past tense, "knowed;" but when he repeated it, with just a slight emphasis:

"I *knowed* him, ma'am," she drew a quick, full breath and her face whitened.

"You knew him," she said slowly. "Does that mean——"

Mullarky scratched his head and looked downward, not meeting her eyes.

"Squint Taylor would tell you the story, ma'am," he said. "You see, ma'am, he worked for Squint, an' Squint was with him when it happened."

"He's dead, then?" She stood rigid, tense, searching Mullarky's face with wide, dreading eyes, and when she saw his gaze shift under hers she drew a deep sigh and leaned against Billy, covering her face with her hands.

Mullarky did not attempt to disturb her; he stood, looking glumly at her, reproaching himself for his awkwardness in breaking the news to her.

It was some minutes before she faced him again, and then she was pale and composed, except for the haunting sadness that had come into her eyes.

"Thank you," she said. "Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Taylor — 'Squint,' you called him? Is that the Taylor who was elected mayor — last week?"

"The same, ma'am." He turned and pointed southward, into the big, level country that she admired so much.

"Do you see that big timber grove 'way off there—where the crick doubles to the north—with that big green patch beyond?" She nodded. "That's Taylor's ranch—the Arrow. [You'll find him there. He's a mighty fine man, ma'am. Larry Harlan would tell you that if he was here. Taylor was the best friend that Larry Harlan ever had—out here." He looked at her pityingly. "I'm sorry, ma'am, to be the bearer of ill news; but when I heard you was in town, lookin' for your father, I couldn't help comin' to see you."

She asked some questions about her father—which Mullarky answered; though he could tell her nothing that would acquaint her with the details of her father's life between the time he had left Westwood and the day of his appearance in this section of the world.

"Mebbe Taylor will know, ma'am," he repeated again and again. And then, when she thanked him once more and mounted her horse, he said:

"You'll be goin' to see Squint right away, ma'am, I suppose. You can ease your horse right down the slope, here, an' strike the level. You'll find a trail right down there. You'll follow it along the crick, an' it'll take you into the Arrow ranchhouse. It'll take you past me own shack, too; an' if you'll stop in an' tell the ol' woman who

you are, she'll be tickled to give you a snack an' a cup of tea. She liked Larry herself."

The girl watched Mullarky ride away. He turned in the saddle, at intervals, to grin at her.

Then, when Mullarky had gone she leaned against Billy and stood for a long time, her shoulders quivering.

At last, though, she mounted the little animal and sent him down the slope.

She found the trail about which Mullarky had spoken, and rode it steadily; though she saw little of the wild, virgin country through which she passed, because her brimming eyes blurred it all.

She came at last to Mullarky's shack, and a stout, motherly woman, with an ample bosom and a kindly face, welcomed her.

"So you're Larry Harlan's daughter," said Mrs. Mullarky, when her insistence had brought the girl inside the cabin; "you poor darlin'. An' Ben told you—the blunderin' idiot. He'll have a piece of my mind when he comes back! An' you're stoppin' at the old Huggins house, eh?" She looked sharply at the girl, and the latter's face reddened. Whereat Mrs. Mullarky patted her shoulder and murmured:

"It ain't your fault that there's indacint women in the world; an' no taint of them will ever reach you. But the fools in this world is always waggin' their tongues, associatin' what's happened with what they think will

happen. An' mebbe they'll wonder about you. It's your uncle that's there with you, you say? Well, then, don't you worry. You run right along to see Squint Taylor, now, an' find out what he knows about your father. Taylor's a mighty fine man, darlin'."

And so Marion went on her way again, grateful for Mrs. Mullarky's kindness, but depressed over the knowledge that the atmosphere of suspicion, which had enveloped her in Westwood, had followed her into this new country which, she had hoped, would have been more friendly.

She came in sight of the Arrow ranchhouse presently, and gazed at it admiringly. It was a big building, of adobe brick, with a wide porch—or gallery—entirely surrounding it. It was in the center of a big space, with timber flanking it on three sides, and at the north was a green stretch of level that reached to the sloping banks of a river.

There were several smaller buildings; a big, fenced enclosure—the corrals, she supposed; a pasture, and a garden. Everything was in perfect order, and had it not been for the aroma of the sage that assailed her nostrils, the awe-inspiring bigness of it all, the sight of thousands of cattle—which she could see through the trees beyond the clearing, she could have likened the place to a big eastern farmhouse of the better class, isolated and prosperous.

She dismounted from her horse at a corner of the house, near a door that opened upon the wide porch, and stood, pale and hesitant, looking at the door, which was closed.

And as she stared at the door, it swung inward and Quinton Taylor appeared in the opening.

CHAPTER IX

A MAN LIES

TAYLOR was arrayed as Marion had mentally pictured him that day when, in the Pullman, she had associated him with ranches and ranges. Evidently he was ready to ride, for leather chaps incased his legs. The chaps were plain, not even adorned with the spangles of the drawings she had seen; and they were well-worn and shiny in spots. A pair of big, Mexican spurs were on the heels of his boots; the inevitable cartridge-belt about his middle, sagging with the heavy pistol; a quirt dangled from his left hand. Assuredly he belonged in this environment—he even seemed to dominate it.

She had wondered how he would greet her; but his greeting was not at all what she had feared it would be. For he did not presume upon their meeting on the train; he gave no sign that he had ever seen her before; there was not even a glint in his eyes to tell her that he remembered the scornful look she had given him when she discovered him listening to the conversation carried on between her uncle and Carrington. His manner indicated that if *she* did not care to mention the matter *he* would

not. His face was grave as he stepped across the porch and stood before her. And he said merely:

"Are you looking for someone, ma'am?"

"I came to see you, Mr. Taylor," she said. (And then he knew that the negro porter on the train had not lied when he said the girl had paid him for certain information.)

But Taylor's face was still grave, for he thought he knew what she had come for. He had overheard a great deal of the conversation between Parsons and Carrington in the dining-car, and he remembered such phrases as: "That fairy tale about her father having been seen in this locality; To get her out here, where there isn't a hell of a lot of law, and a man's will is the only thing that governs him;" and, "Then you lied about Lawrence Harlan having been seen in this country." Also, he remembered distinctly another phrase, uttered by Carrington: "That you framed up on her mother, to get her to leave Larry."

All of that conversation was vivid in Taylor's mind, and mingled with the recollection of it now was a grim pity for the girl, for the hypocritical character of her supposed friends.

To be sure, the girl did not know that Parsons had lied about her father having been seen in the vicinity of Dawes; but that did not alter the fact that Larry Harlan had really been here; and Taylor surmised that she had

made inquiries, thus discovering that there was truth in Carrington's statement.

He got a chair for her and seated himself on the porch railing.

"You came to see me?" he said, encouragingly.

"I am Marion Harlan, the daughter of Lawrence Harlan," began the girl. And then she paused to note the effect of her words on Taylor.

So far as she could see, there was no sign of emotion on Taylor's face. He nodded, looking steadily at her.

"And you are seeking news of your father," he said.

"Who told you to come to me?"

"A man named Ben Mullarky. He said my father had worked for you—that you had been his best friend."

She saw his lips come together in straight lines.

"Poor Larry. You knew he died, Miss Harlan?"

"Mullarky told me." The girl's eyes moistened. "And I should like to know something about him—how he lived after—after he left home; whether he was happy—all about him. You see, Mr. Taylor, I loved him!"

"And Larry Harlan loved his daughter," said Taylor softly.

He began to tell her of her father; how several years before Harlan had come to him, seeking employment; how Larry and himself had formed a friendship; how they had gone together in search of the gold that Larry claimed to have discovered in the Sangre de Christo

Mountains; of the injury Larry had suffered, and how the man had died while he himself had been taking him toward civilization and assistance.

During the recital, however, one thought dominated him, reddening his face with visible evidence of the sense of guilt that had seized him. He must deliberately lie to the daughter of the man who had been his friend.

In his pocket at this instant was Larry's note to him, in which the man had expressed his fear of fortune-hunters. Taylor remembered the exact words:

Marion will have considerable money and I don't want no sneak to get hold of it — like the sneak that got hold of the money my wife had, that I saved. There's a lot of them around. If Marion is going to fall in with one of that kind, I'd rather she wouldn't get what I leave; the man would get it away from her. Use your own judgment and I'll be satisfied.

And Taylor's judgment was that Carrington and Parsons were fortune-hunters; that if they discovered the girl to be entitled to a share of the money that had been received from the sale of the mine, they would endeavor to convert it to their own use. And Taylor was determined they should not have it.

The conversation he had overheard in the dining-car had convinced him of their utter hypocrisy and selfishness; it had aroused in him a feeling of savage resentment and disgust that would not permit him to transfer

a cent of the money to the girl as long as they held the slightest influence over her.

Again he mentally quoted from Larry's note to him:

The others were too selfish and sneaking. (That meant Parsons — and one other.) Squint, I want you to take care of her. . . . Sell — the mine — take my share and for it give Marion a half-interest in your ranch, the Arrow. If there is any left, put it in land in Dawes — that town is going to boom. Guard it for her, and marry her, Squint; she'll make you a good wife.

Since the first meeting with the girl on the train Taylor had felt an entire sympathy with Larry Harlan in his expressed desire to have Taylor marry the girl; in fact, she was the first girl that Taylor had ever wanted to marry, and the passion in his heart for her had already passed the wistful stage — he was determined to have her. But that passion did not lessen his sense of obligation to Larry Harlan. Nor would it — if he could not have the girl himself — prevent him doing what he could to keep her from forming any sort of an alliance with the sort of man Larry had wished to save her from, as expressed in this passage of the note: "If Marion is going to fall in with one of that kind, I'd rather she wouldn't get what I leave."

Therefore, since Taylor distrusted Carrington and Parsons, he had decided he would not tell the girl of the money her father had left — the share of the proceeds of

the mine. He would hold it for her, as a sacred trust, until the time came—if it ever came—when she would have discovered their faithlessness—or until she needed the money. More, he was determined to expose the men.

He knew, thanks to his eavesdropping on the train, at least something regarding the motives that had brought them to Dawes; Carrington's words, "When we get hold of the reins," had convinced him that they and the interests behind them were to endeavor to rob the people of Dawes. That was indicated by their attempt to have David Danforth elected mayor of the town.

Taylor had already decided that he could not permit Marion to see the note her father had left, for he did not want her to feel that she was under any obligation—parental or otherwise—to marry him. If he won her at all, he wanted to win her on his merits.

As a matter of fact, since he had decided to lie about the money, he was determined to say nothing about the note at all. He would keep silent, making whatever explanations that seemed to be necessary, trusting to time and the logical sequence of events for the desired outcome.

He was forced to begin to lie at once. When he had finished the story of Larry's untimely death, the girl looked straight at him.

"Then you were with him when he died. Did—did he mention anyone—my mother—or me?"

"He said: 'Squint, there is a daughter'"—Taylor

was quoting from the note—"“she was fifteen when I saw her last. She looked just like me—thank God for that!”” Taylor blushed when he saw the girl’s face redden, for he knew what her thoughts were. He should not have quoted that sentence. He resolved to be more careful; and went on: “He told me I was to take care of you, to offer you a home at the Arrow—after I found you. I was to go to Westwood, Illinois, to find you. I suppose he wanted me to bring you here.”

The speech was entirely unworthy, and Taylor knew it, and he eased his conscience by adding: “He thought, I suppose, that you would like to be where he had been. I’ve not touched the room he had. All his effects are there—everything he owned, just as he left them. I had given him a room in the house because I liked him (that was the truth), and I wanted him where I could talk to him.”

“I cannot thank you enough for that!” she said earnestly. And then Taylor was forced to lie again, for she immediately asked: “And the mine? It proved to be worthless, I suppose. For,” she added, “that would be just father’s luck.”

“The mine wasn’t what we thought it would be,” said Taylor. He was looking at his boots when he spoke, and he wondered if his face was as red as it felt.

“I am not surprised.” There was no disappointment in her voice, and therefore Taylor knew she was not ava-

ricious — though he knew he had not expected her to be. "Then he left nothing but his personal belongings?" she added.

Taylor nodded.

The girl sat for a long time, looking out over the river into the vast level that stretched away from it.

"He has ridden there, I suppose," she said wistfully. "He was here for nearly three years, you said. Then he must have been everywhere around here." And she got up, gazing about her, as though she would firmly fix the locality for future reminiscent dreams. Then suddenly she said:

"I should like to see his room — may I?"

"You sure can!"

She followed him into the house, and he stood in the open doorway, watching her as she went from place to place, looking at Larry's effects.

Taylor did not remain long at the door; he went out upon the porch again, leaving her in the room, and after a long time she joined him, her eyes moist, but a smile on her lips.

"You'll leave his things there — a little longer, won't you? I should like to have them, and I shall come for them, some day."

"Sure," he said. "But, look here, Miss Harlan. Why should you take his things? Leave them here — and come yourself. That room is yours, if you say the word."

And a half-interest in the ranch. I was going to offer your father an interest in it—if he had lived——”

He realized his mistake when he saw her eyes widen incredulously. And there was a change in her voice—it was full of doubt, of distrust almost.

“What had father done to deserve an interest in your ranch?” she demanded.

“Why,” he answered hesitatingly, “it’s rather hard to say. But he helped me much; he suggested improvements that made the place more valuable; he was a good man, and he took a great deal of the work off my mind—and I liked him,” he finished lamely.

“And do you think I could do his share of the work?” she interrogated, looking at him with an odd smile, the meaning of which Taylor could not fathom.

“I couldn’t expect that, of course,” he said boldly; “but I owe Harlan something for what he did for me, and I thought——”

“You thought you would be charitable to the daughter,” she finished for him, with a smile in which there was gratitude and understanding.

“I am sure I can’t thank you enough for feeling that way toward my father and myself. But I can’t accept, you know.”

Taylor did know, of course. A desperate desire to make amends for his lying, to force upon her gratuitously what he had illegally robbed her of, had been the motive

underlying his offer. And he would have been disappointed had she accepted, for that would have revealed a lack of spirit which he had hoped she possessed.

And yet Taylor felt decidedly uncomfortable over the refusal. He wanted her to have what belonged to her, for he divined from the note her father had left that she would have need of it.

He discovered by judicious questioning, by inference, and through crafty suggestion, that she was entirely dependent upon her uncle; that her uncle had bought the Huggins house, and that Carrington had made her a present of the horse she rode.

This last bit of information, volunteered by Marion, provoked Taylor to a rage that made him grit his teeth.

A little while longer they talked, and when the girl mounted her horse to ride away, they had entered into an agreement under which on Tuesdays and Fridays—the first Tuesday falling on the following day—Taylor was to be absent from the ranch. And during his absence the girl was to come and stay at the ranchhouse, there to occupy her father's room and, if she desired, to enter the other rooms at will.

As a concession to propriety, she was to bring Martha, the Huggins housekeeper, with her.

But Taylor, after the girl had left, stood for an hour on the porch, watching the dust-cloud that followed the girl's progress through the big basin, his face red, his

soul filled with loathing for the part his judgment was forcing him to play. But arrayed against the loathing was a complacent satisfaction aroused over the thought that Carrington would never get the money that Larry Harlan had left to the girl.

CHAPTER X

THE FRAME-UP

JAMES J. CARRINGTON was unscrupulous, but even his most devout enemy could not have said that he lacked vision and thoroughness. And, while he had been listening to Danforth in his apartment in the Castle Hotel, he had discovered that Neil Norton had made a technical blunder in electing Quinton Taylor mayor of Dawes. Perhaps that was why Carrington had not seemed to be very greatly disturbed over the knowledge that Danforth had been defeated; certainly it was why Carrington had taken the first train to the capital.

Carrington was tingling with elation when he reached the capital; but on making inquiries he found that the governor had left the city the day before, and that he was not expected to return for several days.

Carrington passed the interval renewing some acquaintances, and fuming with impatience in the barroom, the billiard-room, and the lobby of his hotel.

But he was the first visitor admitted to the governor's office when the latter returned.

The governor was a big man, flaccid and portly, and he received Carrington with a big Stetson set rakishly on

the back of his head and an enormous black cigar in his mouth. That he was not a statesman but a professional politician was quite as apparent from his appearance as was his huge, welcoming smile, a certain indication that he was on terms of intimate friendship with Carrington. Formerly an eastern political worker, and a power in the councils of his party, his appointment as governor of the Territory had come, not because of his ability to fill the position, but as a reward for the delivery of certain votes which had helped to make his party successful at the polls. He would be the last carpetbag governor of the Territory, for the Territory had at last been admitted to the Union; the new Legislature was even then in session; charters were already being issued to municipalities that desired self-government—and the governor, soon to quit his position as temporary chief, had no real interest in the new régime, and no desire to aid in eliminating the inevitable confusion.

"Take a seat, Jim," he invited, "and have a cigar. My secretary tells me you've been buzzing around here like a bee lost from the hive, for the past week." He grinned hugely at Carrington, poking the latter playfully in the ribs as Carrington essayed to light the cigar that had been given him.

"Worried about that man Taylor, in Dawes, eh?" he went on, as Carrington smoked. "Well, it *was* too bad that Danforth didn't trim him, wasn't it? But"—and

his eyes narrowed — “I’m still governor, and Taylor isn’t mayor yet — and never will be!”

Carrington smiled. “You saw the mistake, too, eh?”

“Saw it!” boomed the governor. “I’ve been watching that town as a cat watches a mouse. Itching for the clean-up, Jim,” he whispered. “Why, I’ve got the papers all made out — ousting him and appointing Danforth mayor. Right here they are.” He reached into a pigeon-hole and drew out some legal papers. “You can serve them yourself. Just hand them to Judge Littlefield — he’ll do the rest. It’s likely — if Taylor starts a fuss, that you’ll have to help Littlefield handle the case — arranging for deputies, and such. If you need any more help, just wire me. I don’t pack my carpetbag for a year yet, and we can do a lot of work in that time.”

Carrington and the governor talked for an hour or more, and when Carrington left for the office he was grinning with pleasurable anticipation. For a municipality, already sovereign according to the laws of the people, had been delivered into his hands.

Just at dusk on Tuesday evening Carrington alighted from the train at Dawes. He went to his rooms in the Castle, removed the stains of travel, descended the stairs to the dining-room, and ate heartily; then, stopping at the cigar-counter to light a cigar, he inquired of the clerk where he could find Judge Littlefield.

"He's got a house right next to the courthouse — on your left, from here," the clerk told him.

A few minutes later Carrington was seated opposite Judge Littlefield, with a table between them, in the front room of the judge's residence.

"My name is Carrington — James J.," was Carrington's introduction of himself. "I have just left the governor, and he gave me these, to hand over to you." He shoved over the papers the governor had given him, smiling slightly at the other.

The judge answered the smile with a beaming smirk.

"I've heard of you," he said; "the governor has often spoken of you." He glanced hastily over the papers, and his smirk widened. "The good people of Dawes will be rather shocked over this decision, I suppose. But laymen *will* confuse things — won't they? Now, if Norton and his friends had come to *me* before they decided to enter Taylor's name, this thing would not have happened."

"I'm glad it *did* happen," laughed Carrington. "The chances are that even Norton would have beaten Danforth, and then the governor could not have interfered."

Carrington's gaze became grim as he looked at the judge. "You are prepared to go the limit in this case, I suppose?" he interrogated. "There is a chance that Taylor and his friends will attempt to make trouble. But any trouble is to be handled firmly, you understand.

There is to be no monkey business. If they accept the law's mandates, as all law-abiding citizens should accept it, all well and good. And if they don't—and they want trouble, we'll give them that! Understand?"

"Perfectly," smiled the judge. "The law is not to be assailed."

Smilingly he bowed Carrington out.

Carrington took a turn down the street, walking until his cigar burned itself out; then he entered the hotel and sat for a time in the lobby. Then he went to bed, satisfied that he had done a good week's work, and conscious that he had launched a heavy blow at the man for whom he had conceived a great and bitter hatred.

CHAPTER XI

"NO FUN FOOLING HER"

ACCOMPANIED by Martha, who rode one of the horses Parsons had bought, Marion Harlan began her trip to the Arrow shortly after dawn.

The girl had said nothing to Parsons regarding her meeting with Taylor the previous day, nor of her intention to pass the day at the Arrow. For she feared that Parsons might make some objection—and she wanted to go.

That she feared her uncle's deterrent influence argued that she was aware that she was doing wrong in going to the Arrow—even with Martha as chaperon; but that was, perhaps, the very reason the thought of going engaged her interest.

She wondered many times, as she rode, with the negro woman trailing her, if there was not inherent in her some of those undesirable traits concerning which the good people of Westwood had entertained fears.

The thought crimsoned her cheeks and brightened her eyes; but she knew she had no vicious thoughts—that she was going to the Arrow, not because she wanted to see Taylor again, but because she wanted to sit in the

room that had been occupied by her father. She wanted to look again at his belongings, to feel his former presence—as she had felt it while gazing out over the vast level beyond the river, where he had ridden many times.

She looked in on Mrs. Mullarky as they passed the Mullarky cabin, and when the good woman learned of her proposed visit to the Arrow, she gave her entire approval.

“I don’t blame you, darlin’,” declared Mrs. Mullarky. “Let the world jabber—if it wants to. If it was me father that had been over there, I’d stay there, takin’ Squint Taylor at his word—an’ divvle a bit I’d care what the world would say about it!”

So Marion rode on, slightly relieved. But the crimson stain was still on her cheeks when she and Martha dismounted at the porch, and she looked fearfully around, half-expecting that Taylor would appear from somewhere, having tricked her.

But Taylor was nowhere in sight. A fat man appeared from somewhere in the vicinity of the stable, doffed his hat politely, informed her that he was the “stable boss” and would care for the horses; he having been delegated by Taylor to perform whatever service Miss Harlan desired; and ambled off, leading the horses, leaving the girl and Martha standing near the edge of the porch.

Marion entered the house with a strange feeling of

guilt and shame. Standing in the open doorway — where she had seen Taylor standing when she had dismounted the day before — she was afflicted with regret and mortification over her coming. It wasn't right for a girl to do as she was doing; and for an instant she hesitated on the verge of flight.

But Martha's voice directly behind her, reassured her.

"They ain't a soul here, honey — not a soul. You've got the whole house to yo'self. This am a lark — shuah enough. He, he, he!"

It was the voice of the temptress — and Marion heeded it. With a defiant toss of her head she entered the room, took off her hat, laid it on a convenient table, calmly telling Martha to do the same. Then she went boldly from one room to another, finally coming to a halt in the doorway of the room that had been occupied by her father.

For her that room seemed to hallow the place. It was as though her father were here with her; as though there were no need of Martha being here with her. The thought of it removed any stigma that might have been attached to her coming; it made her heedless of the opinion of the world and its gossip-mongers.

She forgot the world in her interest, and for more than an hour, with Martha sitting in a chair sympathetically watching her, she reveled in the visible proofs of her father's occupancy of the room.

Later she and Martha went out on the porch, where, seated in rocking-chairs — that had not been on the porch the day before — she filled her mental vision with pictures of her father's life at the Arrow. Those pictures were imaginary, but they were intensely satisfying to the girl who had loved her father, for she could almost see him moving about her.

"You shuah does look soft an' dreamy, honey," Martha told her once. "You looks jes' like a delicate ghost. A while ago, lookin' at you, I shuah was scared you was goin' to blow away!"

But Marion was not the ethereal wraith that Martha thought her. She proved that a little later, when, with the negro woman abetting her, she went into the house and prepared dinner. For she ate so heartily that Martha was forced to amend her former statement.

"For a ghost you shuah does eat plenty, honey," she said.

Later they were out on the porch again. The big level on the other side of the river was flooded with a slumberous sunshine, with the glowing, rose haze of early afternoon enveloping it, and the girl was enjoying it when there came an interruption.

A cowboy emerged from a building down near the corral — Marion learned later that the building was the bunkhouse, which meant that it was used as sleeping-quarters for the Arrow outfit — and walked, with

the rolling stride so peculiar to his kind, toward the porch.

He was a tall young man, red of face, and just now affected with a mighty embarrassment, which was revealed in the awkward manner in which he removed his hat and shuffled his feet as he came to a halt within a few feet of Marion.

"The boss wants to know how you are gettin' along, ma'am, an' if there's anything you're wantin'?"

"We are enjoying ourselves immensely, thank you; and there is nothing we want—particularly."

The puncher had turned to go before the girl thought of the significance of the "boss."

Her face was a trifle pale as she called to the puncher.

"Who is your boss—if you please?" she asked.

The puncher wheeled, a slow grin on his face.

"Why, Squint Taylor, ma'am."

She sat erect. "Do you mean that Mr. Taylor is here?"

"He's in the bunkhouse, ma'am."

She got up, and, holding her head very erect, began to walk toward the room in which she had left her hat.

But half-way across the porch the puncher's voice halted her:

"Squint was sayin' you didn't expect him to be here, an' that I'd have to do the explainin'. He couldn't come, you see."

"Ashamed, I suppose," she said coldly.

She was facing the puncher now, and she saw him grin.

"Why, no, ma'am; I don't reckon he's a heap ashamed. But it'd be mighty inconvenient for him. You see, ma'am, this mornin', when he was gittin' ready to ride to the south line, his cayuse got an ornery streak an' throwed him, sprainin' Squint's ankle."

The girl's emotions suddenly reacted; the resentment she had yielded to became self-reproach. For she had judged hastily, and she had always felt that one had no right to judge hastily.

And Taylor had been remarkably considerate; for he had not even permitted her to know of the accident until after noon. That indicated that he had no intention of forcing himself on her.

She hesitated, saw Martha grinning into a hand, looked at the puncher's expressionless face, and felt that she had been rather prudish. Her cheeks flushed with color.

Taylor had actually been a martyr on a small scale in confining himself to the bunkhouse, when he could have enjoyed the comforts and spaciousness of the ranchhouse if it had not been for her own presence.

"Is—is his ankle badly sprained?" she hesitatingly asked the now sober-faced puncher.

"Kind of bad, ma'am; he ain't been able to do no walkin' on it. Been hobblin' an' swearin', mostly, ma'am. It's sure a trial to be near him."

"And it is warm here; it must be terribly hot in that little place!"

She was at the edge of the porch now, her face radiating sympathy.

"I am not surprised that he should swear!" she told the puncher, who grinned and muttered:

"He's sure first class at it, ma'am."

"Why," she said, paying no attention to the puncher's compliment of his employer, "he is hurt, and I have been depriving him of his house. You tell him to come right out of that stuffy place! Help him to come here!"

And without waiting to watch the puncher depart, she darted into the house, pulled a big rocker out on the porch, got a pillow and arranged it so that it would form a resting-place for the injured man's head—providing he decided to occupy the chair, which she doubted—and then stood on the edge of the porch, awaiting his appearance.

Inside the bunkhouse the puncher was grinning at Taylor, who, with his right foot swathed in bandages, was sitting on a bench, anxiously awaiting the delivery of the puncher's message.

"Well, talk, you damned grinning inquisitor!" was Taylor's greeting to the puncher. "What did she say?"

"At first she didn't seem to be a heap overjoyed to know that you was in this country," said the other; "but

when she heard you'd been hurt she sort of stampeded, invitin' you to come an' set on the porch with her."

Taylor got up and started for the door, the bandaged foot dragging clumsily.

"Shucks," drawled the puncher; "if you go to *runnin'* to her she'll have suspicions. Accordin' to my notion, she expects you to come a hobblin', same as though your leg was broke. 'Help him to come,' she told me. An' you're goin' that way—you hear me! I'll bust your ankle with a club before I'll have her think I'm a liar!"

"Maybe I *was* a little eager," grinned Taylor.

An instant later he stepped out of the bunkhouse door, leaning heavily on the puncher's shoulder.

The two made slow progress to the porch; and Taylor's ascent to the porch and his final achievement of the rocking-chair were accomplished slowly, with the assistance of Miss Harlan.

Then, with a face almost the color of the scarlet neckerchief he wore, Taylor watched the retreat of the puncher.

His face became redder when Miss Harlan drew another rocker close to his and demanded to be told the story of the accident.

"My own fault," declared Taylor. "I was in a hurry. Accidents always happen that way, don't they? Slipped trying to swing on my horse, with him running. Missed the stirrup. Clumsy, wasn't it?"

Eager to keep his word, of course, Marion reasoned. She had insisted that he be gone when she arrived, and he had injured himself hurrying.

She watched him as he talked of the accident. And now for the first time she understood why he had acquired the nickname Squint.

His eyes were deep-set, though not small. He did not really squint, for there was plenty of room between the eyelids—which, by the way, were fringed with lashes that might have been the envy of any woman; but there were many little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, which spread fanwise toward cheek and brow, and these created the illusion of squinting.

Also, he had a habit of partially closing his eyes when looking directly at one; and at such times they held a twinkling glint that caused one to speculate over their meaning.

Miss Harlan was certain the twinkle meant humor. But other persons had been equally sure the twinkle meant other emotions, or passion. Looking into Taylor's eyes in the dining-car, Carrington had decided they were filled with cold, implacable hostility, with the promise of violence, to himself. And yet the squint had not been absent.

Whatever had been expressed in the eyes had been sufficient to deter Carrington from his announced purpose to "knock hell out of" their owner.

The girl was aware that Taylor was not handsome; that his attractions were not of a surface character. Something about him struck deeper than that. A subtle magnetism gripped her—the magnetism of strength, moral and mental. In his eyes she could see the signs of it; in the lines of his jaw and the set of his lips were suggestions of indomitability and force.

All the visible signs were, however, glossed over with the deep, slow humor that radiated from him, that glowed in his eyes.

It all made her conscious of a great similarity between them; for despite the doubts and suspicions of the people of Westwood, she had been able to survive—and humor had been the grace that had saved her from disappointment and pessimism. Those other traits in Taylor—visible to one who studied him—she knew for her own; and her spirits now responded to his.

Her cheeks were glowing as she looked at him, and her eyes, half veiled by the drooping lashes, were dancing with mischief.

“You were in that hot bunkhouse all morning,” she said. “Why didn’t you send word before?”

“You were careful to tell me that you didn’t want me around when you came.”

There was a gleam of reproach in his eyes.

“But you were injured!”

“Look how things go in the world,” he invited, nar-

rowing his eyes at her. "It's almost enough to make a man let go all holds and just drift along. Maybe a man would be just as well off.

"Early this morning I knew I had to light out for the day, and I didn't want to go any more than a gopher wants to go into a rattlesnake's den. But I had to keep my word. Then Spotted Tail gets notions——"

"Spotted Tail?" she interrupted.

"My horse," he grinned at her. "He gets notions. Maybe he wants to get away as much as I want to stay. Anyhow, he was in a hurry; and things shape up so that I've got to stay.

"And then, when I hang around the bunkhouse all morning, worrying because I'm afraid you'll find out that I didn't keep my word, and that I'm still here, you send word that you'll not object to me coming on the porch with you. I'd call that a misjudgment all around—on my part."

"Yes—it was that," she told him. "You certainly are entitled to the comforts of your own house—especially when you are hurt. But are you sure you *worried* because you were afraid I would discover you were here?"

"I expect you can prove that by looking at me, Miss Harlan—noticing that I've got thin and pale-looking since you saw me last?"

She threw a demure glance at him. "I am afraid you

are in great danger; you do not look nearly as well as when I saw you, the first time, on the train."

He looked gravely at her.

"The porter threw them out of the window," he said. "That is, I gave him orders to."

"What?" she said, perplexed. "I don't understand. What did the porter throw out of the window?"

"My dude clothes," he said.

So he *had* observed the ridicule in her eyes.

She met his gaze, and both laughed.

He had been curious about her all along, and he artfully questioned her about Westwood, gradually drawing from her the rather unexciting details of her life. Yet these details were chiefly volunteered, Taylor noticed, and did not result entirely from his questions.

Carrington's name came into the discussion, also, and Parsons. Taylor discovered that Carrington and Parsons had been partners in many business deals, and that they had come to Dawes because the town offered many possibilities. The girl quoted Carrington's words; Taylor was convinced that she knew nothing of the character of the business the men had come to Dawes to transact.

Their talk strayed to minor subjects and to those of great importance, ranging from a discussion of prairie hens to sage comment upon certain abstruse philosophy. Always, however, the personal note was dominant and the personal interest acute.

That atmosphere—the deep interest of each for the other—made their conversation animated. For half the time the girl paid no attention to Taylor's words. She watched him when he talked, noting the various shades of expression of his eyes, the curve of his lips, wondering at the deep music of his voice. She marveled that at first she had thought him uninteresting and plain.

For she had discovered that he was rather good-looking; that he was endowed with a natural instinct to reach accurate and logical conclusions; that he was quiet-mannered and polite—and a gentleman. Her first impressions of him had not been correct, for during their talk she discovered through casual remarks, that Taylor had been educated with some care, that his ancestors were of that sturdy American stock which had made the settling of the eastern New-World wilderness possible, and that there was in his manner the unmistakable gentleness of good breeding.

However, Taylor's first impressions of the girl had endured without amendations. At a glance he had yielded to the spell of her, and the intimate and informal conversation carried on between them; the flashes of personality he caught merely served to convince him of her desirability.

Twice during their talk Martha cleared her throat significantly and loudly, trying to attract their attention.

The efforts bore no fruit, and Martha might have been

entirely forgotten if she had not finally got to her feet and laid a hand on Marion's shoulder.

"I's gwine to lie down a spell, honey," she said. "You-all don't need no third party to entertain you. An' I's powerful tiahd." And over the girl's shoulder she smiled broadly and sympathetically at Taylor.

The sun was filling the western level with a glowing, golden haze when Miss Harlan got to her feet and announced that she was going home.

"It's the first day I have really enjoyed," she told Taylor as she sat in the saddle, looking at him. He had got up and was standing at the porch edge. "That is, it is the first enjoyable day I have passed since I have been here," she added.

"I wouldn't say that I've been exactly bored myself," he grinned at her. "But I'm not so sure about Friday; for if you come Friday the chances are that my ankle will be well again, and I'll have to make myself scarce. You see, my excuse will be gone."

Martha was sitting on her horse close by, and her eyes were dancing.

"Don' you go an' bust your haid, Mr. Taylor!" she warned. "I knows somebuddy that would be powerful sorry if that would happen to you!"

"Martha!" said Marion severely. But her eyes were eloquent as they met Taylor's twinkling ones; and she saw a deep color come into Taylor's cheeks.

Taylor watched her until she grew dim in the distance; then he turned and faced the tall young puncher, who had stepped upon the porch and had been standing near.

The puncher grinned. "Takin' 'em off now, boss?" he asked.

He pointed to the bandages on Taylor's right foot. In one of the young puncher's hands was Taylor's right boot.

"Yes," returned Taylor.

He sat down in the rocker he had occupied all afternoon, and the young puncher removed the bandages, revealing Taylor's bare foot and ankle, with no bruise or swelling to mar the white skin.

Taylor drew on the sock which the puncher drew from the boot; then he pulled on the boot and stood up.

The puncher was grinning hugely, but no smile was on Taylor's face.

"It worked, boss," said the puncher; "she didn't tumble. I thought I'd laff my head off when I seen her fixin' the pillow for you—an' your foot not hurt more than mine. You ought to be plumb tickled, pullin' off a trick like that!"

"I ain't a heap tickled," declared Taylor glumly. "There's no fun in fooling *her*!"

Which indicated that Taylor's thoughts were now serious.

CHAPTER XII

LIFTING THE MASK

ELAM PARSONS awoke early in the morning following that on which Marion Harlan's visit to the Arrow occurred. He lay for a long time smiling at the ceiling, with a feeling that something pleasurable was in store for him, but not able to determine what that something was.

It was not long, however, before Parsons remembered.

When he had got out of bed the previous morning he had discovered the absence of Marion and Martha. Also, he found that two of the horses were missing — Marion's, and one of the others he had personally bought.

Parsons spent the day in Dawes. Shortly before dusk he got on his horse and rode homeward. Dismounting at the stable, he noted that the two absent horses had not come in. He grinned disagreeably and went into the house. He emerged almost instantly, for Marion and Martha had not returned.

Later he saw them, Marion leading, coming up the slope that led to the level upon which the house stood.

Marion had retired early, and after she had gone to her room Parsons had questioned Martha.

Twice while getting into his clothes this morning Parsons chuckled audibly. There was malicious amusement in the sound.

Once he caught himself saying aloud:

"I knew it would come, sooner or later. And she's picked out the clodhopper! This will tickle Carrington!"

Again he laughed—such a laugh as the good people of Westwood might have used had they known what Parsons knew—that Marion Harlan had visited a stranger at his ranchhouse—a lonely place, far from prying eyes.

Parsons hated the girl as heartily as he had hated her father. He hated her because of her close resemblance to her parent; and he had hated Larry Harlan ever since their first meeting.

Parsons likewise had no affection for Carrington. They had been business associates for many years, and their association had been profitable for both; but there was none of that respect and admiration which marks many partnerships.

On several occasions Carrington had betrayed greediness in the division of the spoils of their ventures. But Carrington was the strong man, ruthless and determined, and Parsons was forced to nurse his resentment in silence. He meant some day, however, to repay Carrington, and he lost no opportunity to harass him.

And yet it had been Parsons who had brought Carrington to Westwood two years before. He knew Carrington; he knew something of the big man's way with women, of his merciless treatment of them. And he had invited Carrington to Westwood, hoping that the big man would add Marion Harlan to his list of victims.

So far, Carrington had made little progress. This fact, contrary to Parsons' principles, had afforded the man secret enjoyment. He liked to see Carrington squirm under disappointment. He anticipated much pleasure in watching Carrington's face when he should tell him where Marion had been the day before.

He breakfasted alone—early—chuckling his joy. And shortly after he left the table he was on a horse, riding toward Dawes.

He reached town about eight and went directly to Carrington's rooms in the Castle.

Carrington had shaved and washed, and was sitting at a front window, coatless, his hair uncombed, when Parsons knocked on the door.

"You're back, eh?" said Parsons as he took a chair near the window. "Danforth was telling me you went to see the governor. Did you fix it?"

Carrington grinned. "Taylor was to take the oath today. He won't take it—at least, not the sort of oath he expected."

"It's lucky you knew the governor."

"H-m." The grim grunt indicated that, governor or no governor, Carrington would not be denied.

Parsons smirked. But Carrington detected an unusual quality in the smirk—something more than satisfaction over the success of the visit to the governor. There was malicious amusement in the smirk, and anticipation. Parsons' expressed satisfaction was not over what *had* happened, but over what was *going* to happen.

Carrington knew Parsons, and therefore Carrington gave no sign of what he had seen in Parsons' face. He talked of Dawes and of their own prospects. But once, when Carrington mentioned Marion Harlan, quite casually, he noted that Parsons' eyes widened.

But Parsons said nothing on the subject which had brought him until he had talked for half an hour. Then, noting that his manner had aroused Carrington's interest, he said softly:

"This man, Taylor, seems destined to get in your way, doesn't he?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Carrington shortly.

"Do you remember telling me—on the train, with this man, Taylor, listening—that your story to Marion, of her father having been seen in this locality, was a fairy tale—without foundation?"

At Carrington's nod Parsons continued:

"Well, it seems it was not a fairy tale, after all. For Larry Harlan was in his section for two or three years!"

"Who told you that?" Carrington slid forward in his chair and was looking hard at Parsons.

Parsons was enjoying the other's astonishment, and Parsons was not to be hurried—he wanted to *taste* the flavor of his news; it was as good to his palate as a choice morsel of food to the palate of a disciple of Epicurus.

"It came in a sort of roundabout way, I understand," said Parsons. "It seems that during your absence Marion made a number of inquiries about her father. Then a man named Ben Mullarky rode over to the house and told her that Larry had been in this country—that he had worked for the Arrow."

"That's Taylor's ranch," said Carrington. A deep scowl furrowed his forehead; his lips extended in a sullen pout.

Parsons was enjoying him. "Taylor again, eh?" he said softly. "First, he appears on the train, where he gets an earful of something we don't want him to hear; then he is elected mayor, which is detrimental to our interests; then we discover that Larry Harlan worked for him. *You'll* be interested to know that Marion went right over to the Arrow—in fact, she spent part of Monday there, and practically *all* of yesterday. More, Taylor has invited her to come whenever she wants to."

"She went alone?" demanded Carrington.

"With Martha, my negro housekeeper. But that—" Parsons made a gesture of derision and went on: "Martha

says Taylor was there with her, and that the two of them—with Martha asleep in the house—spent the entire afternoon on the porch, talking rather intimately.”

To Parsons’ surprise Carrington did not betray the perturbation Parsons expected. The scowl was still furrowing his forehead, his lips were still in the sullen pout; but he said nothing, looking steadily at Parsons.

At last his lips moved slightly; Parsons could see the clenched teeth between them.

“Where’s Larry Harlan now?”

Parsons related the story told him by Martha—which had been imparted to the negro woman by Marion in confidence—that Larry Harlan had been accidentally killed, searching for a mine.

When Parsons finished Carrington got up. There was a grin on his face as he stepped to where Parsons sat and placed his two hands heavily on the other’s shoulders.

There was a grin on his face, but his eyes were agleam with a slumbering passion that made Parsons catch his breath with a gasp. And his voice, low, and freighted with menace, caused Parsons to quake with terror.

“Parsons,” he said, “I want you to understand this: I am going to be the law out here. I’ll run things to suit myself. I’ll have no half-hearted loyalty, and I’ll destroy any man who opposes me! Those who are not with me to the last gasp are against me!” He laughed, and Par-

sons felt the man's hot breath on his face — so close was it to his own.

"I was born a thousand years too late, Parsons!" he went on. "I am a robber baron brought down to date — modernized. I believe that in me flows the blood of a pirate, a savage, or an ancient king; I have all the instincts of a tribal chief whose principles are to rule or ruin! I'll have no law out here but my own desires; and hypocrisy — in others — doesn't appeal to me!

"You've told me a tale that interested me, but in the telling of it you made one mistake — you enjoyed the discomfort you thought it would give me. You tingled with malice. Just to show you that I'll not tolerate disloyalty from you — even in thought — I'm going to punish you."

He dropped his big hands to Parsons' throat, shutting off the incipient scream that issued from between the man's lips. Parsons fought with all his strength to escape the grip of the iron fingers at his throat, twisting and squirming frenziedly in the chair. But the fingers tightened their grip, and when the man's face began to turn blue-black, Carrington released him and looked down at his victim, laughing vibrantly.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHADOW OF TROUBLE

ELAM recovered slowly, for Carrington had choked him into unconsciousness. Out of the blank, dark coma Parsons came, his brain reeling, his body racked with agonizing pains. His hands went to his throat before he could open his eyes; he pulled at the flesh to ease the constriction that still existed there; he caught his breath in great gasps that shrilled through the room. And when at last he succeeded in getting his breath to come regularly, he opened his eyes and saw Carrington seated in a chair near him, watching him with a cold, speculative smile.

He heard Carrington's voice saying: "Pretty close, wasn't it, Parsons?" But he did not answer; his vocal cords were still partially paralyzed.

He closed his eyes again and stretched out in the chair. Carrington thought he had fainted, but Parsons was merely resting—and thinking.

His thoughts were not pleasant. Many times during the years of their association he had seen the beast in Carrington's eyes, but this was the first time Carrington had even shown it in his presence, naked and ugly. Car-

rington had told him many times that were he not hemmed in with laws and courts he would tramp ruthlessly over every obstacle that got in his way; and Parsons knew now that the man had meant what he said. The beast in him was rampant; his passions were to have free rein; he had thrown off the shackles of civilization and was prepared to do murder to attain his aims.

Parsons realized his own precarious predicament. Carrington controlled every cent Parsons owned—it was in the common pool, which was in Carrington's charge. Parsons might leave Dawes, but his money must stay—Carrington would never give it up. More, Parsons was now afraid to ask for an accounting or a division, for fear Carrington would kill him.

Parsons knew he must stay in Dawes, and that from now on he must play lackey to the master who, at last in an environment that suited him, had so ruthlessly demonstrated his principles.

In a spirit of abject surrender Parsons again opened his eyes and sat up. Carrington rose and again stood over him.

"You understand now, Parsons, I'm running things. You stay in the background. If you interfere with me I'll kill you. I'll kill you if you laugh at me again. Your job out here is to take care of Marion Harlan. You're to keep her here. If she gets away I'll manhandle you! Now get out of here!"

An hour later Parsons was sitting on the front porch of the big house, staring vacantly out into the big level below him, his heart full of hatred and impotent resentment; his brain, formerly full of craft and guile, now temporarily atrophied through its attempts to comprehend the new character of the man who had throttled him.

In Dawes, Carrington was getting into his clothing. He was smiling, his eyes glowing with grim satisfaction. At nine o'clock Carrington descended the stairs, stopped in the hotel lobby to light a cigar; then crossed the street and went into the courthouse, where he was greeted effusively by Judge Littlefield. Quinton Taylor, too, was going to the courthouse.

This morning at ten o'clock, according to information received from Neil Norton — sent to Taylor by messenger the night before — Taylor was to take the oath of office.

Taylor was conscious of the honor bestowed upon him by the people of Dawes, though at first he had demurred, pointing out that he was not actually a resident of the town — the Arrow lying seven miles southward. But this objection had been met and dismissed by his friends, who had insisted that he was a resident of the town by virtue of his large interests there, and from the fact that he occupied an apartment above the Dawes bank, and that he spent more time in it than he spent in the Arrow ranchhouse.

But on the ride to Dawes — on Spotted Tail — (this

morning wonderfully docile despite Tuesday's slander by his master) — Taylor's thoughts dwelt not upon the honor that was to be his, but upon the questionable trick he had played on Marion Harlan, with the able assistance of the tall young puncher, Bud Hemmingway.

He looked down at the foot, now unbandaged, with a frown. The girl's complete and matter-of-fact belief in the story of his injury; her sympathy and deep concern; the self-accusation in her eyes; the instant pardon she had granted him for staying at the ranchhouse when he should not have stayed — all these he arrayed against the bald fact that he had tricked her. And he felt decidedly guilty.

And yet somehow there was some justification for the trick. It was the justification of desire. The things a man wants are not to be denied by the narrow standards of custom. Does a man miss an opportunity to establish acquaintance with a girl he has fallen in love with, merely because custom has decreed that she shall not come unattended — save by a negro woman — to his house?

Taylor made desire his justification, and his sense of guilt was dispelled by half.

Nor was the guilt so poignant that it rested heavily on his conscience since he had done no harm to the girl.

What harm had been done had been done to Taylor himself. He kept seeing Marion as she sat on the porch, and the spell of her had seized him so firmly that last

night, after she had left, the ranchhouse had seemed to be nothing more than four walls out of which all the life had gone. He felt lonesome this morning, and was in the grip of a nameless longing.

All the humor had departed from him. For the first time in all his days a conception of the meaning of life assailed him, revealing to him a glimpse of the difficulties of a man in love. For a man may love a girl: his difficulties begin when the girl seems to become unattainable.

Looming large in Taylor's thoughts this morning was Carrington. Having overheard Carrington talking of her on the train, Taylor thought he knew what Carrington wanted; but he was in doubt regarding the state of the girl's feelings toward the man. Had she yielded to the man's intense personal magnetism?

Carrington was handsome; there was no doubt that almost any girl would be flattered by his attentions. And had Carrington been worthy of Marion, Taylor would have entertained no hope of success—he would not even have thought of it.

But he had overheard Carrington; he knew the man's nature was vile and bestial; and already he hated him with a fervor that made his blood riot when he thought of him.

When he reached Dawes he found himself hoping that Marion would not be in town to see that his ankle was unbandaged. But he might have saved himself that throb

of perturbation, for at that minute Marion was standing in the front room of the big house, looking out of one of the windows at Parsons, wondering what had happened to make him seem so glum and abstracted.

When Taylor dismounted in front of the courthouse there were several men grouped on the sidewalk near the door.

Neil Norton was in the group, and he came forward, smiling.

"We're here to witness the ceremony," he told Taylor.

Taylor's greeting to the other men was not that of the professional politician. He merely grinned at them and returned a short: "Well, let's get it over with," to Norton's remark. Then, followed by his friends, he entered the courthouse.

Taylor knew Judge Littlefield. He had no admiration for the man, and yet his greeting was polite and courteous—it was the greeting of an American citizen to an official.

Taylor's first quick glance about the interior of the courthouse showed him Carrington. The latter was sitting in an armchair near a window toward the rear of the room. He smiled as Taylor's glance swept him, but Taylor might not have seen the smile. For Taylor was deeply interested in other things.

A conception of the serious responsibility that he was to accept assailed him. Until now the thing had been

entirely personal; his thoughts had centered upon the honor that was to be his—his friends had selected him for an important position. And yet Taylor was not vain.

Now, however, ready to accept the oath of office, he realized that he was to become the servant of the municipality; that these friends of his had elected him not merely to honor him but because they trusted him, because they were convinced that he would administer the affairs of the young town capably and in a fair and impartial manner. They depended upon him for justice, advice, and guidance.

All these things, to be sure, Taylor would give them to the best of his ability. They must have known that or they would not have elected him.

These thoughts sobered him as he walked to the little wooden railing in front of the judge's desk; and his face was grave as he looked at the other.

"I am ready to take the oath, Judge Littlefield," he gravely announced.

Glancing sidewise, Taylor saw that a great many men had come into the room. He did not turn to look at them, however, for he saw a gleam in Judge Littlefield's eyes that held his attention.

"That will not be necessary, Mr. Taylor," he heard the judge say. "The governor, through the attorney-general, has ruled you were not legally elected to the office you aspire to. Only last night I was notified of the deci-

sion. It was late, or I should have taken steps to apprise you of the situation."

Taylor straightened. He heard exclamations from many men in the room; he was conscious of a tension that had come into the atmosphere. Some men scuffled their feet; and then there was a deep silence.

Taylor smiled without mirth. His dominant emotion was curiosity.

"Not legally elected?" he said. "Why?"

The judge passed a paper to Taylor; it was one of those that had been delivered to the judge by Carrington.

The judge did not meet Taylor's eyes.

"You'll find a full statement of the case, there," he said. "Briefly, however, the governor finds that your name did not appear on the ballots."

Norton, who had been standing at Taylor's side all along, now shoved his way to the railing and leaned over it, his face white with wrath.

"There's something wrong here, Judge Littlefield!" he charged. "Taylor's name was on every ballot that was counted for him. I personally examined every ballot!"

The judge smiled tolerantly, almost benignantly.

"Of course—to be sure," he said. "Mr. Taylor's name appeared on a good many ballots; his friends *wrote* it, with pencil, and otherwise. But the law expressly states that a candidate's name must be *printed*. Therefore, obeying the letter of the law, the governor has ruled

that Mr. Taylor was not elected." There was malicious satisfaction in Judge Littlefield's eyes as they met Taylor's. Taylor could see that the judge was in entire sympathy with the influences that were opposing him, though the judge tried, with a grave smile, to create an impression of impartiality.

"Under the governor's ruling, therefore," he continued, "and acting under explicit directions from the attorney-general, I am empowered to administer the oath of office to the legally elected candidate, David Danforth. Now, if Mr. Danforth is in the courtroom, and will come forward, we shall conclude."

Mr. Danforth was in the courtroom; he was sitting near Carrington; and he came forward, his face slightly flushed, with the gaze of every person in the room on him.

He smiled apologetically at Taylor as he reached the railing, extending a hand.

"I'm damned sorry, Taylor," he declared. "This is all a surprise to me. I hadn't any doubt that they would swear you in. No hard feelings?"

Taylor had been conscious of the humiliation of his position. He knew that his friends would expect him to fight. And yet he felt more like gracefully yielding to the forces which had barred him from office upon the basis of so slight a technicality. And despite the knowledge that he had been robbed of the office, he would have

taken Danforth's hand, had he not at that instant chanced to glance at Carrington.

The latter's eyes were aglow with a vindictive triumph; as his gaze met Taylor's, his lips curved with a sneer.

A dark passion seized Taylor—the bitter, savage rage of jealousy. The antagonism he had felt for Carrington that day on the train when he had heard Carrington's voice for the first time was suddenly intensified. It had been growing slowly, provoked by his knowledge of the man's evil designs on Marion Harlan. But now there had come into the first antagonism a gripping lust to injure the other, a determination to balk him, to defeat him, to meet him on his own ground and crush him.

For Carrington's sneer had caused the differences between them to become sharply personal; it would make the fight that was brewing between the two men not a political fight, but a fight of the spirit.

Taylor interpreted the sneer as a challenge, and he accepted it. His eyes gleamed with hatred unmistakable as they held Carrington's; and the grin on his lips was the cold, unhumorous grin of the fighter who is not dismayed by odds. His voice was low and sharp, and it carried to every person in the room:

"We won't shake, Danforth; you are not particular enough about the character of your friends!"

The look was significant, and it compelled the eyes

of all of Taylor's friends, so that Carrington instantly found himself the center of interest.

However, he did not change color; on his face a bland smile testified to his entire indifference to what Taylor or Taylor's friends thought of him.

Taylor grinned mirthlessly at the judge, spoke shortly to Norton, and led the way out through the front door, followed by a number of his friends.

Norton took Taylor into his office, adjoining the courthouse, and threw himself into a chair, grumbling profanely. Outside they could see the crowd filing down the street, voicing its opinion of the startling proceeding.

"An election is an election," they heard one man say—a Taylor sympathizer. "What difference does it make that Taylor's name wasn't *printed*? It's a dawg-gone frame-up, that's what it is!"

But Danforth's adherents were not lacking; and there were arguments in loud, vigorous language among men who passed the door of the *Eagle* office.

"I could have printed the damned ballots, myself—if I had thought it necessary," mourned Norton. "And now we're skinned out of it!"

Norton's disgust was complete and bitter; he had slid down in the chair, his chin on his chest, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his trousers.

Yet his dejection had not infected Taylor; the latter's lips were curved in a faint smile, ironic and saturnine.

It was plain to Norton that whatever humor there was in the situation was making its appeal to Taylor. The thought angered Norton, and he sat up, demanding sharply: "Well, what in hell are you going to do about it?"

Taylor grinned at the other. "Nothing, now," he said. "We might appeal to the courts, but if the law specifies that a candidate's name must be printed, the courts would sustain the governor. It looks to me, Norton, as though Carrington and Danforth have the cards stacked."

Norton groaned and again slid down into his chair. He heard Taylor go out, but he did not change his position. He sat there with his eyes closed, profanely accusing himself, for he alone was to blame for the complete defeat that had descended upon his candidate; and he could not expect Taylor to fight a law which, though unjust and arbitrary, was the only law in the Territory.

Taylor had not gone far. He stepped into the door of the courthouse, to meet Carrington, who was coming out. Danforth and Judge Littlefield were talking animatedly in the rear of the room. They ceased talking when they saw Taylor, and faced toward him, looking at him wonderingly.

Carrington halted just inside the threshold of the doorway, and he, too, watched Taylor curiously, though there was a bland, sneering smile on his face.

Taylor's smile as he looked at the men was still faintly

ironic, and his eyes were agleam with a light that baffled the other men—they could not determine just what emotion they reflected.

And Taylor's manner was as quietly deliberate and nonchalant as though he had merely stepped into the room for a social visit. His gaze swept the three men.

"Framing up—again, eh?" he said, with drawling emphasis. "You sure did a good job for a starter. I just stepped in to say a few words to you—all of you. To you first, Littlefield." And now his eyes held the judge—they seemed to squint genially at the man.

"I happen to know that our big, sleek four-flusher here"—nodding toward Carrington—"came here to loot Dawes. Quite accidentally, I overheard him boasting of his intentions. Danforth was sent here by Carrington more than a year ago to line things up, politically. I don't know how many are in the game—and I don't care. You are in it, Littlefield. I saw that by the delight you took in informing me of the decision of the attorney-general. I just stepped in to tell you that I know what is going on, and to warn you that you can't do it! You had better pull out before you make an ass of yourself, Littlefield!"

The judge's face was crimson. "This is an outrage, Taylor!" he sputtered. "I'll have you jailed for contempt of court!"

"Not you!" gibed Taylor, calmly. "You haven't the

nerve! I'd like nothing better than to have you do it. You're a little fuzzy dog that doesn't crawl out of its kennel until it hears the snap of its master's fingers! That's all for you!"

He grinned at Danforth, feliney, and the man flushed under the odd gleam in the eyes that held his.

"I can classify you with one word, Dave," he declared; "you're a crook! That lets you out; you do what you are told!"

He now ignored the others and faced Carrington.

His grin faded quickly, the lips stiffening. But still there was a hint of cold humor in his manner that created the impression that he was completely in earnest; that he was keenly enjoying himself and that he did not feel at all tragic. And yet, underlying the mask of humor, Carrington saw the passionate hatred Taylor felt for him.

Carrington sneered. He attempted to smile, but the malevolent bitterness of his passions turned the smile into a hideous smirk. He had hated Taylor at first sight; and now, with the jealousy provoked by the knowledge that Taylor had turned his eyes toward Marion Harlan, the hatred had become a lust to destroy the other.

Before Taylor could speak, Carrington stepped toward him, thrusting his face close to Taylor's. The man was in the grip of a mighty rage that bloated his face, that made his breath come in great labored gasps. He had

not meant to so boldly betray his hatred, but the violence of his passions drove him on.

He knew that Taylor was baiting him, mocking him, taunting him; that Taylor's words to the judge and to Danforth had been uttered with the grimly humorous purpose of arousing the men to some unwise and precipitate action; he knew that Taylor was enjoying the confusion he had brought.

But Carrington had lost his self-control.

Without a word, but with a smothered imprecation that issued gutturally from between his clenched teeth, he swung a fist with bitter malignance at Taylor's face.

The blow did not land, for Taylor, self-possessed and alert, had been expecting it. He slipped his head sidewise slightly, evading the fist by a narrow margin, and, tensed, his muscles taut, he drove his own right fist upward, heavily.

Carrington, reeling forward under the impetus of the force he had expended, ran fairly into the fist. It crashed to the point of his jaw and he was unconscious, rigid, and upright on his feet in the instant before he sagged and tumbled headlong out through the open doorway into the street.

With a bound, his face set in a mirthless grin, Taylor was after him, landing beyond him in the windrowed dust at the edge of the sidewalk, ready and willing to administer further punishment.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FACE OF A FIGHTER

SLOUCHING in his chair, in an attitude of complete dejection, Neil Norton was glumly digesting the dregs of defeat.

The *Eagle* office adjoined the courthouse. Both were one-story frame structures, flimsy, with one thin wall between them; and to Norton's ears as he sat with his unpleasant thoughts, came the sound of voices, muffled, but resonant. Someone was speaking with force and insistence. Norton attuned his ears to the voice. It was then he discovered there was only one voice, and that Taylor's.

He sat erect, both hands gripping the arms of his chair. Then he got up, walked to the front door of the *Eagle* office, and looked out. He was just in time to see Carington tumble out through the door of the courthouse and land heavily on the sidewalk in front of the building. Immediately afterward he saw Taylor follow.

Norton exclaimed his astonishment, and he saw Taylor turn toward him, a broad, mirthless grin on his face.

"Good Heavens!" breathed Norton, "he's started a ruckus!"

Taylor had not moved. He was looking at Norton when a man leaped from the door of the courthouse, straight at him. It was Danforth, his face hideous with rage.

Taylor sensed the movement, wheeled, stumbled, and lost his balance just as Danforth crashed against him. The two men went down in a heap into the deep dust of the street, rolling over and over.

Danforth's impetus had given him the initial advantage, and he was making the most of it. His fists were working into Taylor's face as they rolled in the dust, his arms swinging like flails. Taylor, caught almost unprepared, could not get into a position to defend himself. He shielded his face somewhat by holding his chin close to his chest and hunching his shoulders up; but Danforth landed some blows.

There came an instant, however, when Taylor's surprise over the assault changed to resentment over the punishment he was receiving. He had struck Carrington in self-defense, and he had not expected the attack by Danforth.

Norton, also surprised, saw that his friend was at a disadvantage, and he was running forward to help him when he saw Taylor roll on top of Danforth.

To Norton's astonishment, Taylor did not seem to be in a vicious humor, despite the blows Danforth had landed on him. Taylor came out of the smother with a grin on

his face, wide and exultant, and distinctly visible to Norton in spite of the streaks of dust that covered it. Taylor shook his head, his hair erupting a heavy cloud. Then he got up, permitting Danforth to do likewise.

Regaining his feet, Danforth threw himself headlong toward Taylor, cursing, his face working with malignant rage. When Taylor hit him the dust flew from Danforth's clothes as it rolls from a dirty carpet flayed with a beater. Danforth halted, his knees sagged, his head wobbled. But Taylor gave him a slight respite, and he came on again.

This time Taylor met him with a smother of sharp, deadening uppercuts that threw the man backward, his mouth open, his eyes closed. He fell, sagging backward, his knees unjointed, without a sound.

And now Norton was not the only spectator. Far up the street a man had emerged from a doorway. He saw the erupting volcanoes of dust in the street, and he ran back, shouting, "Fight! Fight!"

Dawes had seen many fights, and had grown accustomed to them. But there is always novelty in another, and long before Danforth had received the blows that had rendered him inactive, nearly all the doors of Dawes's buildings were vomiting men. They came, seemingly, in endless streams, in groups, in twos and singly, eager, excited, all the streams converging at the street in front of the courthouse.

Mindful of the ethics in an affair of this kind, the crowd kept considerably at a distance, permitting the fighting men to continue at their work without interference, with plenty of room for their energetic movements.

Word ran from lip to lip that Taylor, stung by the knowledge that he had been robbed of the office to which he had been elected, had attacked Carrington and Danforth with the grim purpose of punishing them personally for their misdeeds.

Taylor was aware of the gathering crowd. When he had delivered the blows that had finished his political rival, he saw the dense mass of men in the street around him; and he felt that all Dawes had assembled.

There was still no rancor in Taylor's heart; the same savage humor which had driven him into the courthouse to acquaint Carrington and the others with his knowledge of their designs, still gripped him. He had not meant to force a fight, but neither had he any intention of permitting Carrington and Danforth to inflict physical punishment upon him.

But a malicious devil had seized him. He knew that what he had done would be magnified and distorted by Carrington, Danforth, and the judge; that they would charge him with the blame for it; that he faced the probability of a jail sentence for defending himself. And he was determined to complete the work he had started.

Therefore, having disposed of Danforth, he grinned at

the eager, excited faces that hemmed him about, and wheeled toward Carrington.

He was just in time. For Carrington, not badly hurt by Taylor's blow, which had catapulted him out of the door of the courthouse, had been standing back a little, awaiting an opportunity. The swiftness of Taylor's movements had prevented interference by Carrington; but now, with Danforth down, Carrington saw his chance.

Without a word, Carrington lunged forward. They met with a shock that caused the dry dust to splay and spume upward and outward in thin, minute streaks like the leaping, spraying waters of a fountain. They were lost, momentarily, in a haze, as the dust fell and enveloped them.

They emerged from the blot presently, Carrington staggering, his chin on his chest, his eyes glazed—Taylor crowding him closely. For while they had been lost in the smother of dust, Taylor had landed a deadening uppercut on the big man's chin.

The big man's brain was befogged; and yet he still retained presence of mind enough to shield his chin from another of those terrific blows. He had crossed his arms over the lower part of his face, fending off Taylor's fists with his elbows.

A Danforth man in the crowd called on Carrington to "wallop" Taylor, and the big man's answering grin indicated that he was not as badly hurt as he seemed.

Almost instantly he demonstrated that, for when Taylor, still following him, momentarily left an opening, Carrington stepped quickly forward and struck—his big arm flashing out with amazing rapidity.

The heavy fist landed high on Taylor's head above the ear. It was not a blow that would have finished the fight, even had it landed lower, but it served to warn Taylor that his antagonist was still strong, and he went in more warily.

The advantage of the fight was all with Taylor. For Taylor was cool and deliberate, while Carrington, raging over the blows he had received, and in the clutch of a bitter desire to destroy his enemy, wasted much energy in swinging wildly.

The inaccuracy of Carrington's hitting amused Taylor; the men in the crowd about him could see his lips writhing in a vicious smile at Carrington's efforts.

Carrington landed some blows. But he had lived luxuriously during the later years of his life; his muscles had deteriorated, and though he was still strong, his strength was not to be compared with that of the out-of-door man whose clean and simple habits had toughened his muscles until they were equal to any emergency.

And so the battle went slowly but surely against Carrington. Fighting desperately, and showing by the expression of his face that he knew his chances were small,

he tried to work at close quarters. He kept coming in stubbornly, blocking some blows, taking others; and finally he succeeded in getting his arms around Taylor.

The crowd had by this time become intensely partisan. At first it had been silent, but now it became clamorous. There were some Danforth men, and knowing Danforth to be aligned with Carrington—because, it seemed to them, Carrington was taking Danforth's end of the fight—they howled for the big man to "give it to him!" And they grew bitter when they saw that despite Carrington's best efforts, and their own verbal support of him, Carrington was doomed to defeat.

Taylor's admirers vastly outnumbered Carrington's. They did not find it necessary to shout advice to their champion; but they shouted and roared with approval as Taylor, driving forward, the grin still on his face, striking heavily and blocking deftly, kept his enemy retreating before him.

Carrington, locking his arms around Taylor, hugged him desperately for some seconds—until he recovered his breath, and until his head cleared, and he could fix objects firmly in his vision; and then he heaved mightily, swung Taylor from his feet and tried to throw him. Taylor's feet could get no leverage, but his arms were still free, and with both of them he hammered the big man's head until Carrington, in insane rage, threw Taylor from him.

Taylor landed a little off balance, and before he could set himself, Carrington threw himself forward. He swung malignantly, the blow landing glancingly on Taylor's head, staggering him. His feet struck an obstruction and he went to one knee, Carrington striking at him as he tried to rise.

The blow missed, Carrington turning clear around from the force of the blow and tumbling headlong into the dust near Taylor.

They clambered to their feet at the same instant, and in the next they came together with a shock that made them both reel backward. And then, still grinning, Taylor stepped lightly forward. Paying no attention to Carrington's blows, he shot in several short, terrific, deadening uppercuts that landed fairly on the big man's chin. Carrington's hands dropped to his sides, his knees doubled, and he fell limply forward into the dust of the street, where he lay, huddled and unconscious, while turmoil raged over him.

For the Danforth men in the crowd had yielded to rage over the defeat of their favorites. They had seen Danforth go down under the terrific punishment meted out to him by Taylor; they had seen Carrington suffer the same fate. Several of them drove forward, muttering profane threats.

Norton, pale and watchful, fearing just such a contingency, shoved forward to the center, shouting:

"Hold on, men! None of that! It's a fair fight! Keep off, there—do you hear?"

A score of Taylor men surged forward to Norton's side; the crowd split, forming two sections—one group of men massing near Norton, the other congregating around a tall man who seemed to be the leader of their faction. A number of other men—the cautious and faint-hearted element which had no personal animus to spur it to participation in what seemed to threaten to develop into a riot—retreated a short distance up the street and stood watching, morbidly curious.

But though violence, concerted and deadly, was imminent, it was delayed. For Taylor had not yet finished, and the crowd was curiously following his movements.

Taylor was a picturesquely ludicrous figure. He was covered with dust from head to foot; his face was streaked with it; his hair was full of it; it had been ground into his cheeks, and where blood from a cut on his forehead had trickled to his right temple, the dust was matted until it resembled crimson mud.

'And yet the man was still smiling. It was not a smile at which most men care to look when its owner's attention is definitely centered upon them; it was a smile full of grimly humorous malice and determination; the smile of the fighting man who cares nothing for consequences.

The concerted action which had threatened was, by the tacit consent of the prospective belligerents, postponed

for the instant. The gaze of every partisan—and of all the non-partisans—was directed at Taylor.

He had not yet finished. For an instant he stood looking down at Carrington and Danforth—both now beginning to recover from their chastisement, and sitting up in the dust gazing dizzily about them—then with a chuckle, grim and malicious, Taylor dove toward the door of the courthouse, where Littlefield was standing.

The judge had been stunned by the ferocity of the action he had witnessed. Whatever judicial dignity had been his had been whelmed by the paralyzing fear that had gripped him, and he stood, holding to the door-jambs, nerveless, motionless.

He saw Taylor start toward him; he saw a certain light leaping in the man's eyes, and he cringed and cried out in dread.

But he had not the power to retreat from the menace that was approaching him. He threw out his hands impotently as Taylor reached him, as though to protest physically. But Taylor ignored the movement, reaching upward, a dusty finger and thumb closing on the judge's right ear.

There was a jerk, a shrill cry of pain from the judge, and then he was led into the street, near where Carrington and Danforth had fallen, and twisted ungently around until he faced the crowd.

"Men," said Taylor, in the silence that greeted him as

he stood erect, his finger and thumb still gripping the judge's ear, "Judge Littlefield is going to say a few words to you. He's going to tell you who started this ruckus — so there won't be any nonsense about actions in contempt of court. Deals like this are pulled off better when the court takes the public into its confidence. Who started this thing, judge? Did I?"

"No-o," was Littlefield's hesitating reply.

"Who did start it?"

"Mr. Carrington."

"You saw him?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

"He—er—struck at you."

"And Danforth?"

"He attacked you while you were in the street."

"And I'm not to blame?"

"No."

Taylor grinned and released the judge's ear. "That's all, gentlemen," he said; "court is dismissed!"

The judge said nothing as he walked toward the door of the courthouse. Nor did Carrington and Danforth speak as they followed the judge. Both Carrington and Danforth seemed to have had enough fighting for one day.

The victor looked around at the faces in the crowd that were turned to his, and his grin grew eloquent.

"Looks like we're going to have a mighty peaceable administration, boys!" he said. His grin included Norton, at whom he deliberately winked. Then he turned, mounted his horse—which had stood docilely near by during the excitement, and which whinnied as he approached it—and rode down the street to the Dawes bank, before which he dismounted. Then he went to his rooms on the floor above, washed and changed his clothes, and attended to the bruises on his face. Later, looking out of the window, he saw the crowd slowly dispersing; and still later he opened the door on Neil Norton, who came in, deep concern on his face.

"You've started something, Squint. After you left I went into the *Eagle* office. The partition is thin, and I could hear Carrington raising hell in there. You look out; he'll try to play some dog's trick on you now! There's going to be the devil to pay in this man's town!"

Taylor laughed. "How long does it take for a sprained ankle to mend, Norton?"

Norton looked sharply at Taylor's feet.

"You sprain one of yours?" he asked.

"Lord, no!" denied Taylor. "I was just wondering. How long?" he insisted.

"About two weeks. Say, Squint, your brain wasn't injured in that ruckus, was it?" he asked solicitously.

"It's as good as it ever was."

"I don't believe it!" declared Norton. "Here you've started something serious, and you go to rambling about sprained ankles."

"Norton," said Taylor slowly, "a sprained ankle is a mighty serious thing—when you've forgotten which one it was!"

"What in——"

"And," resumed Taylor, "when you don't know but that she took particular pains to make a mental note of it. If I'd wrap the left one up, now, and she knew it was the right one that had been hurt—or if I'd wrap up the right one, and she knew it was the wrong one, why she'd likely——"

"*She?*" groaned Norton, looking at his friend with bulging eyes that were haunted by a fear that Taylor's brain *had* cracked under the strain of the excitement he had undergone. He remembered now, that Taylor *had* acted in a peculiar manner during the fight; that he had grinned all through it when he should have been in deadly earnest.

"Plumb loco!" he muttered.

And then he saw Taylor grinning broadly at him; and he was suddenly struck with the conviction that Taylor was not insane; that he was in possession of some secret that he was trying to confide to his friend, and that he had begun obliquely. Norton drew a deep breath of relief.

"Lord!" he sighed, "you sure had me going. And you don't know which ankle you sprained?"

"I've clean forgot. And now she'll find out that I've lied to her."

"*She?*" said Norton significantly.

"Marion Harlan," grinned Taylor.

Norton caught his breath with a gasp. "You mean you've fallen in love with her? And that you've made her — Oh, Lord! What a situation! Don't you know her uncle and Carrington are in cahoots in this deal?"

"It's my recollection that I told you about that the day I got back," Taylor reminded him. And then Taylor told him the story of the bandaged ankle.

When Taylor concluded, Norton lay back in his chair and regarded his friend blankly.

"And you mean to tell me that all the time you were fighting Carrington and Danforth you were thinking about that ankle?"

"Mostly all the time," Taylor admitted.

Norton made a gesture of impotence. "Well," he said, "if a man can keep his mind on a girl while two men are trying to knock hell out of him, he's sure got a bad case. And all I've got to say is that you're going to have a lovely ruckus!"

CHAPTER XV.

GLOOM — AND PLANS

ELAM PARSONS sat all day on the wide porch of the big house nursing his resentment. He was hunched up in the chair, his shoulders were slouched forward, his chin resting on the wings of his high, starched collar, his lips in a pout, his eyes sullen and gleaming with malevolence.

Parsons was beginning to recover from his astonishment over the attack Carrington had made on him. He saw now that he should have known Carrington was the kind of man he had shown himself to be; for now that Parsons reflected, he remembered little things that Carrington had done which should have warned him.

Carrington had never been a real friend. Carrington had used him—that was it; Carrington had made him think he was an important member of the partnership, and he had thought so himself. Now he understood Carrington. Carrington was selfish and cruel—more, Carrington was a beast and an ingrate. For it had been Parsons who had made it possible for Carrington to succeed—for he had used Parsons' money all along—having had very little himself.

So Parsons reflected, knowing, however, that he had not the courage to oppose Carrington. He feared Carrington; he had always feared him, but now his fear had become terror—and hate. For Parsons could still feel the man's fingers at his throat; and as he sat there on the porch his own fingers stroked the spot, while in his heart flamed a great yearning for vengeance.

Marion Harlan had got up this morning feeling rather more interested in the big house than she had felt the day before—or upon any day that she had occupied it. She, like Parsons, had awakened with a presentiment of impending pleasure. But, unlike Parsons, she found it impossible to definitely select an outstanding incident or memory upon which to base her expectations.

Her anticipations seemed to be broad and inclusive—like a clear, unobstructed sunset, with an effulgent glow that seemed to embrace the whole world, warming it, bringing a great peace.

For upon this morning, suddenly awakening to the pure, white light that shone into her window, she was conscious of a feeling of satisfaction with life that was strange and foreign—a thing that she had never before experienced. Always there had been a shadow of the past to darken her vision of the future, but this morning that shadow seemed to have vanished.

For a long time she could not understand, and she

snuggled up in bed, her brow thoughtfully furrowed, trying to solve the mystery. It was not until she got up and was looking out of the window at the mighty basin in which—like a dot of brown in a lake of emerald green—clustered the buildings of the Arrow ranch, that knowledge in an overwhelming flood assailed her. Then a crimson flush stained her cheeks, her eyes glowed with happiness, and she clasped her hands and stood rigid for a long time.

She knew now. A name sprang to her lips, and she murmured it aloud, softly: "Quinton Taylor."

Later she appeared to Martha—a vision that made the negro woman gasp with amazement.

"What happen to you, honey? You-all git good news? You look light an' airy—like you's goin' to fly!"

"I've decided to like this place—after all, Martha. I—I thought at first that I wouldn't, but I have changed my mind."

Martha looked sharply at her, a sidelong glance that had quite a little subtle knowledge in it.

"I reckon that 'Squint' Taylor make a good many girls change their mind, honey—he, he, he!"

"Martha!"

"Doan you git 'sturbed, now, honey. Martha shuah knows the signs. I done discover the signs a long while ago—when I fall in love with a worfless nigger in St. Louis. He shuah did captivate me, honey. I done try to

wiggle out of it—but 'tain't no use. Face the fac's, Martha, face the fac's, I tell myself—an' I done it. 'Ain't no use for to try an' fool the fac's, honey—not one bit of use! The ol' fac' he look at you an' say: 'Doan you try to wiggle 'way from me; I's heah, an' heah I's goin' to stay!' That Squint man ain't no lady-killer, honey, but he's shuah a he-man from the groun' up!"

Marion escaped Martha as quickly as she could; and after breakfast began systematically to rearrange the furniture to suit her artistic ideals.

Martha helped, but not again did Martha refer to Quinton Taylor—something in Marion's manner warned her that she could trespass too far in that direction.

Some time during the morning Marion saw Parsons ride up and dismount at the stable door; and later she heard him cross the porch. She looked out of one of the front windows and saw him huddled in a big rocking-chair, and she wondered at the depression that sat so heavily upon him.

The girl did not pause in her work long enough to partake of the lunch that Martha set for her—so interested was she; and therefore she did not know whether or not Parsons came into the house. But along about four o'clock in the afternoon, wearied of her task, Marion entered the kitchen. From Martha she learned that Parsons had not stirred from the chair on the porch during the entire day.

Concerned, Marion went out to him.

Parsons did not hear her; he was still moodily and resentfully reviewing the incident of the morning.

He started when the girl placed a gentle hand on one of his shoulders, seeming to cringe from her touch; then he looked up at her suddenly.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Don't you feel well, Uncle Elam?" she inquired. Her hand rose from his shoulder to his head, and her fingers ran through his hair with a light, gentle touch that made him shiver with repugnance. There were times when Parsons hated this living image of his brother-in-law with a fervor that seemed to sear his heart. Now, however, pity for himself had rather dulled the edge of his hatred. A calamity had befallen him; he was crushed under it; and the sympathy of one whom he hated was not entirely undesirable.

No sense of guilt assailed the man. He had never betrayed his hate to her, and he would not do so now. That wasn't his way. He had always masked it from her, making her think he felt an affection for her which was rather the equal of that which custom required a man should feel for a niece. Yet he had always hated her.

"I'm not exactly well," he muttered. "It's the damned atmosphere, I suppose."

"Martha tells me that it *does* affect some persons,"

said the girl. "And lack of appetite seems to be one of the first symptoms—in your case. For Martha tells me you have not eaten."

The girl's soft voice irritated Parsons.

"Go away!" he ordered crossly; "I want to think!"

It was not the first time the girl had endured his moods. She smiled tolerantly, and softly withdrew, busying herself inside the house.

Parsons did not eat supper; he slunk off to bed and lay for hours in his room brooding over the thing that had happened to him.

He got up early the next morning, mounted his horse and left the house before Marion could get a glimpse of him. It was still rather early when he reached Dawes. There, in a saloon, he overheard the story of the fight in the street in front of the courthouse, and with tingling eagerness and venomous satisfaction he listened to a man telling another of the terrible punishment inflicted upon Carrington by Quinton Taylor.

Parsons did not go to see Carrington, for he feared a repetition of Carrington's savage rage, should he permit the latter to observe his satisfaction over the incident of yesterday. He knew he could not face Carrington and conceal the gloating triumph that gripped him.

So he returned to the big house. And for the greater part of the day he sat in the rocker on the porch, his soul filled with a vindictive joy.

He ate heartily, too; and his manner indicated that he had quite recovered from the indisposition that had affected him the previous day. He even smiled at Marion when she told him he was "looking better."

But his bitter yearning for vengeance had not been satisfied by the knowledge that Taylor had thrashed Carrington. He knew, now that Carrington had ruthlessly cast him aside, that he was no longer to figure importantly in the scheme to loot the town; he knew that it was Carrington's intention to rob him of every dollar he had entrusted to the man. He knew, too, that Carrington would not hesitate to murder him should he offer the slightest objection, or should he make any visible resistance to Carrington's plans.

But Parsons was determined to be revenged upon Carrington, and he was convinced that he could secure his revenge without boldly announcing his plans.

As for that, he had no plans. But while sitting in the rocker on the porch during the long afternoon, the vindictive light in his eyes suddenly deepened, and he grinned evilly.

That night after supper he exerted himself to be agreeable to Marion. During the interval between sunset and darkness he walked with the girl along the edge of the butte above the big valley which held the irrigation dam. And while standing in a timber grove at the edge of the butte, he questioned her deftly about the news she had

received of her father, and she told him of her visits to the Arrow.

He had watched her narrowly, and he saw the flush that came into her cheeks each time Taylor was mentioned.

"He is a remarkably forceful man," he observed once, when he mentioned Taylor. "And if I am not mistaken, Carrington is going to have his hands full with him."

"What do you mean? Do you mean that Mr. Taylor is not in sympathy with Carrington's plans concerning Dawes?"

"I mean just that. And if you had happened to be in Dawes yesterday you might have witnessed a demonstration of Taylor's lack of sympathy with Carrington's plans. For"—and now Parsons' eyes gleamed maliciously—"after Judge Littlefield, acting under instructions from the governor, had refused to administer the oath of office to Taylor—inducting his rival, Danforth, into the position instead——"

Here the girl interrupted, and Parsons was forced to relate the tale in its entirety.

"Uncle Elam," she said when Parsons paused, "are you certain that Carrington's intentions toward Dawes are honorable?"

Parsons smiled crookedly behind a palm, and then uncertainly at the girl.

"I don't know, Marion. Carrington is a rather hard

man to gauge. He has always been mighty uncommu-
nicative and headstrong. He is getting ruthless and dom-
ineering, too. I am rather afraid—that is, my dear, I
am beginning to believe we made a mistake in Carrington.
He doesn't seem to be the sort of man we thought him
to be. If he were like that man Taylor, now——” He
paused and glanced covertly at the girl, noting the glow
in her eyes.

“Yes,” he resumed, “Taylor is a man. My dear,” he
added confidentially, “there is going to be trouble in
Dawes—I am convinced of that; trouble between Car-
rington and Taylor. Taylor thrashed Carrington yester-
day, but Carrington isn't the kind to give up. I have
withdrawn from active participation in the affairs that
brought me here. I am not going to take sides. I don't
care who wins. That may sound disloyal to you—but
look here!” He showed her several black and blue marks
on his throat. “Carrington did that—the day before
yesterday. Choked me.” His voice quavered with self-
pity, whereat the girl caught her breath in quick sympathy
and bent to examine the marks. When she stood erect
again Parsons saw her eyes flashing with indignation, and
he knew that whatever respect the girl had had for Car-
rington had been forever destroyed.

“Oh!” she said, “why did he choke you?”

“Because I frankly told him I did not approve of his
methods,” lied Parsons, smirking virtuously. “He

showed his hand, unmistakably, and his methods mean evil to Dawes."

The girl stiffened. "I shall go directly to Dawes and tell Carrington what I think of him!" she declared.

"No—for God's sake!" protested Parsons. "He would kill me! He would know, instantly, that I had been talking. My life would not be worth a snap of your fingers! Don't let on that I have said *anything* to you! Let him come here, and treat him as you have always treated him. But warn Taylor. Taylor may know something—it is certain he suspects something—but Taylor will not know everything. Make a friend of Taylor, my dear. Go to him—visit his ranch—as much as you like. But if Carrington says anything to you about going there, tell him I opposed it. That will mislead him."

When Parsons and the girl reached the house, Parsons stood near the kitchen door and watched her enter. He did not go in, himself; he walked around to the front and sat on the edge of the porch, grinning maliciously. For he knew something of the tortures of jealousy, and he was convinced that he had added something to the antagonism that already had been the cause of one clash between Carrington and Taylor. And Parsons was convinced that both he and Carrington had made a mistake in planning to loot Dawes; that despite the connivance of the governor and Judge Littlefield, Quinton Taylor would defeat them.

Parsons might lose his money; but the point was that Carrington would also lose. And if Parsons was wise and cautious—and did not antagonize Taylor—there was a chance that he might gain more through his friendship—a professed friendship—for Taylor, than he would have won had he been loyal to Carrington. At the least, he would have the satisfaction of working against Carrington in the dark. And to a man of Parsons' character that was a satisfaction not to be lightly considered.

CHAPTER XVI

A MAN BECOMES A BRUTE

DURING the days that Parsons had passed nursing his resentment, Carrington had been busy. Despite the bruises that marked his face (which, by the way, a clever barber had disguised until they were hardly visible) Carrington appeared in public as though nothing had happened.

The fight at the courthouse had aroused the big man to the point of volcanic action. The lust for power that had seized him; the implacable resolution to rule, to win, to have his own way in all things; his passionate hatred of Taylor; his determination to destroy anyone who got in his path—these were the forces that drove him.

Taylor had brought matters to a sudden and unexpected crisis. Carrington had planned to begin his campaign differently, to insinuate himself into the political life of Dawes; and he had gone to the courthouse intending to keep in the background, but Taylor had forced him into the open.

Therefore, Carrington had no choice, and he instantly accepted Taylor's challenge. After reentering the court-

house, following the departure of Taylor, Carrington had insisted that Judge Littlefield have Taylor taken into custody on a contempt of court charge. Littlefield had flatly refused, and the resulting argument had been what Neil Norton had overheard. But Littlefield had not yielded to Carrington's insistence.

"That would be ridiculous, after what has happened," the judge declared. "The whole country would be laughing at us. More, you can see that public sentiment is with Taylor. And he forced me to publicly admit that you were to blame. I simply won't do it!"

"All right," grinned Carrington, darkly; "I'll find another way to get him!"

And so for the instant Carrington dismissed Taylor from his thoughts, devoting his attention to the task of organizing his forces for the campaign he was to make against the town.

He held many conferences with Danforth and with three of five men who had been elected to the new city council—that political body having also been provided under the new charter. Three of the members—Cartwright, Ellis, and Warden—were Danforth men, cogs of that secret machine which for more than a year Danforth had been perfecting at Carrington's orders.

Some officials were appointed by Mayor Danforth—at Carrington's direction; a chief of police, a municipal judge, a town clerk, a treasurer—and a host of other

office-holders inevitable to a system of government which permits the practice.

Carrington dominated every conference; he made it plain that he was to rule Dawes—that Danforth and all the others were subject to his orders.

Only one day was required to perfect Carrington's organization, and on Thursday evening, with everything running smoothly, Carrington appeared in the palm-decorated foyer of the Castle, a smugly complacent smile on his face. For he had won the first battle in the war he was to wage. To be sure, he had been worsted in a physical encounter with Taylor, as the bruises still on his face indicated, but he intended to repay Taylor for that thrashing—and his lips went into an ugly pout when his thoughts dwelt upon the man.

He had almost forgotten Parsons; he did not think of the other until about eight o'clock in the evening, when, with Danforth in the barroom of the Castle, Danforth mentioned his name. Then Carrington remembered that he had not seen Parsons since he had throttled the man. He ordered another drink, not permitting Danforth to see his eyes, which were glowing with a flame that would have betrayed him.

"This is good-night," he said to Danforth as he raised his glass. "I've got to see Parsons tonight."

Yet it was not Parsons who was uppermost in his mind when he left the Castle, mounted on his horse; the face

of Marion Harlan was in the mental picture he drew as he rode toward the Huggins house, and there ran in his brain a reckless thought—which had been uttered to Parsons at the instant before his fingers had closed around the latter's throat a few days before:

“I was born a thousand years too late, Parsons! I am a robber baron brought down to date—modernized. I believe that in me flows the blood of a pirate, a savage, or an ancient king. I have all the instincts of a tribal chief whose principles are to rule or ruin! I'll have no law out here but my own desires!”

And tonight Carrington's desires were for the girl who had accompanied him to Dawes; the girl who had stirred his passions as no woman had ever stirred them, and who—now that he had seized the town's government—was to be as much his vassal as Parsons, Danforth—or any of them. He grinned as he rode toward the Huggins house—a grin that grew to a laugh as he rode up the drive toward the house; low, vibrant, hideous with its threat of unrestrained passion.

The night had been too beautiful for Marion Harlan to remain indoors, and so, after darkness had swathed the big valley back of the house, she had slipped out, noting that her uncle had gone again to the chair on the front porch. She had walked with Parsons along the butte above the valley, but she wanted to be alone now, to

view the beauties without danger of interruption. 'Above all, she wanted to think.

For the news that Parsons had communicated to her had affected her strangely; she felt that her uncle's revelations of Carrington's character amounted to a vindication of her own secret opinion of the man.

He had been a volcanic wooer, and she had distrusted him all along. She had never permitted that distrust to appear on the surface, however, out of respect for her uncle—for she had always thought he and Carrington were firm friends. She saw now, though, that she had always suspected Carrington of being just what her uncle's revelation had proved him to be—a ruthless, selfish, domineering brute of a man, who would have no mercy upon any person who got in his way.

Reflecting upon his actions during the days she had known him in Westwood—and upon his glances when sometimes she had caught him looking at her, and at other times when his gaze—bold, and flaming with naked passion—had been fixed upon her, she shuddered, comparing him with Quinton Taylor, quiet, polite, and considerate.

Loyally, she hated Carrington now for the things he had done to Parsons. She mentally vowed that the next time she saw Carrington she would tell him exactly what she thought of him, regardless of the effect her frank opinion might have on her uncle's fortunes.

But still she had not come to the edge of the butte for the purpose of devoting her entire thoughts to Carrington; there was another face that obtruded insistently in the mental pictures she drew—Quinton Taylor's. And she found a grass knoll at the edge of the butte, twisted around so that she could look over the edge of the butte and into the big basin that slumbered somberly in the mysterious darkness, staring intently until she discovered a pin-point of light gleaming out of it. That light, she knew, came from one of the windows of the Arrow ranch-house, and she watched it long, wondering what Taylor would be doing about now.

For she was keeping no secrets from herself tonight. She knew that she liked Taylor better than she had ever liked any man of her acquaintance.

At first she had told herself that her liking for the man had been aroused merely because he had been good to her father. But she knew now that she liked Taylor for himself. There was no mistaking the nameless longing that had taken possession of her; the insistent and yearning desire to be near him; the regret that had affected her when she had left the Arrow at the end of her last visit. Taylor would never know how near she had come to accepting his invitation to share the Arrow with him. Had it not been for propriety—the same propriety which had inseparably linked itself with all her actions—which she must observe punctiliously despite the fact that girls of

her acquaintance had violated it openly without hurt or damage to their reputations; had it not been that she must bend to its mandates, because of the shadow that had always lurked near her, she would have gone to live at the Arrow.

For she knew that she could have stayed at the Arrow without danger. Taylor was a gentleman — she knew — and Taylor would never offend her in the manner the world affected to dread — and suspect. But she could not do the things other girls could do — that was why she had refused Taylor's invitation.

She had thought she had conquered her aversion for the big house — the aversion that had been aroused because of the story Martha had told her regarding its former inhabitants, but that aversion recurred to her with disquieting insistence as she sat there on the edge of the butte.

It seemed to her that the serpent of immorality which had dragged its trail across hers so many times was never to leave her, and she found herself wondering about the house and about Carrington and her uncle.

Carrington had bought the horse for her — Billy; and she had accepted it after some consideration. But what if Carrington had bought the house? That would mean — Why, the people of Dawes, if they discovered it — if Carrington had bought it — might place their own interpretation upon the fact that she was living in it.

And the interpretation of the people of Dawes would be no more charitable than that of the people of Westwood! They would think——

She got up quickly, her face pale, and started toward the house, determined to ask her uncle.

Walking swiftly toward the front porch, where she had seen Parsons go, she remembered that Parsons had told her he had arranged for the house, but that might not mean that he had personally bought it.

She meant to find out, and if Carrington owned the house, she would not stay in it another night—not even tonight.

She was walking fast when she reached the edge of the porch—almost running; and when she got to the nearest corner, she saw that the porch was quite vacant; Parsons must have gone in.

She stood for an instant at the porch-edge, a beam of silvery moonlight streaming upon her through a break in the trees overhead, convinced that Parsons had gone to bed; and convinced, likewise, that, were she to disturb him now to ask the question that was in her mind, he would laugh at her.

She decided she would wait until the morning, and she was about to return to the edge of the butte, when she realized that it had grown rather late. She had not noticed how quickly the time had fled.

She turned, intending to enter the house from one of

the rear doors through which she had emerged, when a sound reached her ears — the rapid drumming of a horse's hoofs. She wheeled, facing the direction from which the sound came — and saw Carrington riding toward her, not more than fifty feet distant.

He saw her at the instant her gaze rested on him — an instant before, she surmised, for there was a huge grin on his face as she turned to him.

He was at her side before she could obey a sudden impulse to run — for she did not wish to talk to him tonight — and in another instant he had dismounted and was standing close to her.

"All alone, eh?" he laughed. "And enjoying the moon? Do you know that you made a ravishing picture, standing there with the light shining on you? I saw you as you started to turn, and I shall remember the picture all my life! You are more beautiful than ever, girl!"

Carrington was breathing fast. The girl thought he had been riding hard. But, despite that explanation for the repressed excitement under which he seemed to be laboring, the girl thought she detected the presence of restrained passion in his eyes, and she shrank back a little.

She had often seen passion in his eyes, identical with what glowed in them now, but she had always felt a certain immunity, a masterfulness over him that had permitted her to feel that she could repulse him at will. Now, however, she felt a sudden, cringing dread of him.

The dread, no doubt, was provoked by her uncle's revelation of the man's character; and, for the first time during her acquaintance with Carrington, she felt a fear of him, and became aware of the overpowering force and virility of the man.

Her voice was a little tremulous when she answered:

"I was looking for Uncle Elam. He must have gone in."

His face was not very distinct to her, for he was standing in a shadow cast by a near-by tree, and she could not see the bruises that marred the flesh, but it seemed to her that his face had never seemed so repulsive. And the significance of his grin made her gasp.

"That's good. I'm glad he did go in; I did not come to see Parsons."

She had meant to take him to task for what he had done to her uncle, but there was something in his voice that made thoughts of defending Parsons seem futile—a need gone in the necessity to conserve her voice and strength for an imminent crisis.

For Carrington's voice, thick and vibrant, smote her with a presentiment of danger to herself. She looked sharply at him, saw that his face was red and bloated with passion and, taking a backward step, she said shortly:

"I must go in. I—I promised Martha——"

His voice interrupted her; she felt one of his hands on her arm, the fingers gripping it tightly.

"No, you don't," he said, hoarsely; "I came here to have a talk with you, and I mean to have it!"

"What do you mean?" she asked. She was rigid and erect, but she could not keep the quaver out of her voice.

"Playing the innocent, eh?" he mocked, his voice dry and light. "You've played innocent ever since I saw you the first time. It doesn't go anymore. You're going to face the music." He thrust his face close to hers and the expression of his eyes thrilled her with horror.

"What do you suppose I brought you here for?" he demanded. "I'll tell you. I bought the house for you. Parsons knows why—Dawes knows why—everybody knows. You ought to know—you shall know." He laughed, sneeringly. "Westwood could tell you, or the woman who lived in the Huggins house before you came. Martha could tell you—she lived here——"

He heard her draw her breath sharply and he mocked her, gloating:

"Ah, Martha has told you! Well, you've got to face the music, I tell you! I've got things going my way here—the way I've wanted things to go since I've been old enough to realize what life is. I've got the governor, the mayor, the judges—everything—with me, and I'm going to rule. I'm going to rule, my way! If you are sensible, you'll have things pretty easy; but if you're going to try to balk me you're going to pay—plenty!"

She did not answer, standing rigid in his grasp, her

face chalk-white. He did not notice her pallor, nor how she stood, paralyzed with dread; and he thought because of her silence that she was going to passively submit. He thought victory was near, and he was going to be magnanimous in his moment of triumph.

His grip on her arm relaxed and he leaned forward to whisper:

"That's the girl. No fuss, no heroics. We'll get along; we'll——"

Her right hand struck his face—a full sweep of the arm behind it—burning, stinging, sending him staggering back a little from its very unexpectedness. And before he could make a move to recover his equilibrium she had gone like a flash of light, as elusive as the moonbeam in which she had stood when he had first come upon her.

He cursed gutturally and leaped forward, running with great leaps toward the rear of the house, where he had seen her vanish. He reached the door through which she had gone, finding it closed and locked against him. Stepping back a little, he hurled himself against the door, sending it crashing from its hinges, so that he tumbled headlong into the room and sprawled upon the floor. He was up in an instant, tossing the wreck of the door from him, breathing heavily, cursing frightfully; for he had completely lost his senses and was in the grip of an insane rage over the knowledge that she had tricked him.

Parsons heard the crash as the door went from its hinges. He got out of bed in a tremor of fear and opened the door of his room, peering into the big room that adjoined the dining-room. From the direction of the kitchen he caught a thin shaft of light—from the kerosene-lamp that Martha had placed on a table for Marion's convenience. A big form blotted out the light, casting a huge, gigantic shadow; and Parsons saw the shadow on the ceiling of the room into which he looked.

Huge as the shadow was, Parsons had no difficulty in recognizing it as belonging to Carrington; and with chattering teeth Parsons quickly closed his door, locked it, and stood against it, his knees knocking together.

Martha, too, had heard the crash. She bounded out of bed and ran to the door of her room, swinging it wide, for instinct told her something had happened to Marion. Her room was closer to the kitchen, and she saw Carrington plainly, as he was rising from the débris. And she was just in time to see Marion slipping through the doorway of her own room. And by the time Carrington got to his feet, Martha had heard Marion's door click shut, heard the lock snap home.

Martha instantly closed the door of her own room, fastened it and ran to another door that connected her room with Marion's. She swung that door open and looked into the girl's room; heard the girl stifle a shriek—for the girl thought Carrington was coming upon her

from that direction—and then Martha was at the girl's side, whispering to her—excitedly comforting her.

"The damn trash—houndin' you this way! He ain' goin' to hurt you, honey—not one bit!"

Outside the door they could hear Carrington walking about in the room. There came to the ears of the two women the scratch of a match, and then a steady glimmer of light streaked into the room from the bottom of the door, and they knew Carrington had lighted a lamp. A little later, while Martha stood, her arms around the girl, who leaned against the negro woman, very white and still, they heard Carrington talking with Parsons. They heard Parsons protesting, Carrington cursing him.

"He ain' goin' to git you, honey," whispered Martha. "That man come heah the firs' day, an' I knowed he's a rapsallion." She pointed upward, to where a trap-door, partly open, appeared in the ceiling of the room.

"There's the attic, honey. I'll boost you, an' you go up there an' hide from that wild man. You got to, for that worfless Parsons am tellin' him which room you's in. You hurry—you heah me!"

She helped the girl upward, and stood listening until the trap-door grated shut. Then she turned and grinned at the door that led into the big room adjoining the kitchen. Carrington was at it, his shoulder against it; Martha could hear him cursing.

"Open up, here!" came Carrington's voice through

the door, muffled, but resonant. "Open the door, damn you, or I'll tear it down!"

"Tear away, white man!" giggled Martha softly. "They's a big 'sprise waitin' you when you git in heah!"

For an instant following Carrington's curses and demands there was a silence. It was broken by a splintering crash, and the negro woman saw the door split so that the light from the other room streaked through it. But the door held, momentarily. Then Carrington again lunged against it and it burst open, pieces of the lock flying across the room.

This time Carrington did not fall with the door, but reeled through the opening, erect, big, a vibrant, mirthless laugh on his lips.

The light from the other room streamed in past him, shining full upon Martha, who stood, her hands on her hips, looking at the man.

Carrington was disconcerted by the presence of Martha when he had expected to see Marion. He stepped back, cursing.

Martha giggled softly.

"What you doin' in my room, man; just when I'se goin' to retiah? You git out o' heah—quick! Yo' heah me? Yo' ain't got no business bustin' my door down!"

"Bah!" Carrington's voice was malignant with baffled rage. With one step he was at Martha's side, his hands on her throat, his muscles rigid and straining.

"Where's Marion Harlan?" he demanded. "Tell me, you black devil, or I'll choke hell out of you!"

Martha was not frightened; she giggled mockingly.

"That girl bust in heah a minute ago; then she bust out ag'in, runnin' fit to kill herself. I reckon by this time she's done throw herself off the butte—rather than have you git her!"

Carrington shoved Martha from him, so that she staggered and fell; and with a bound he was through the door that led into Martha's room.

The negro woman did not move. She sat on the floor, a malicious grin on her face, listening to Carrington as he raged through the house.

Once, about five minutes after he left, Carrington returned and stuck his head into the room. Martha still sat where Carrington had thrown her. She did not care what Carrington did to the house, so long as he was ignorant of the existence of the trap-door.

And Carrington did not notice the door. For an hour Martha heard him raging around the house, opening and slamming doors and overturning furniture. Once when she did not hear him for several minutes, she got up and went to one of the windows. She saw him, out at the stable, looking in at the horses.

Then he returned to the house, and Martha resumed her place on the floor. Later, she heard Carrington enter the house again, and after that she heard Parsons' voice,

raised in high-terrered protest. Then there was another silence. Again Martha looked out of a window. This time she saw Carrington on his horse, riding away.

But for half an hour Martha remained at the window. She feared Carrington's departure was a subterfuge, and she was not mistaken. For a little later Carrington returned, riding swiftly. He slid from his horse at a little distance from the house and ran toward it. Martha was in the kitchen when he came in. He did not speak to her as he came into the room, but passed her and again made a search of the house. Passing Martha again he gave her a malevolent look, then halted at the outside door.

The man's wild rage seemed to have left him; he was calm — polite, even.

"Tell your mistress I am sorry for what has occurred. I am afraid I was a bit excited. I shall not harm her; I won't bother her again."

He stepped through the doorway and, going again to a window and drawing back the curtain slightly, Martha watched him.

Carrington went to the stable, entered, and emerged again presently, leading two horses — Parsons' horse and Billy. He led the animals to where his own horse stood, climbed into the saddle and rode away, the two horses following. At the edge of the wood he turned and looked back. Then the darkness swallowed him.

For another half-hour Martha watched the Dawes trail

from a window. Then she drew a deep breath and went into Marion's room, standing under the trap-door.

"I reckon you kin come down now, honey—he's gone."

A little later, with Marion standing near her in the room, the light from the kerosene-lamp streaming upon them through the shattered door, Martha was speaking rapidly:

"He acted mighty suspicious, honey; an' he's up to some dog's trick, shuah as you'm alive. You got to git out of heah, honey—mighty quick! 'Pears he thinks you is hid somewhares around heah, an' he's figgerin' on makin' you stay heah. An' if you wants to git away, you's got to walk, for he's took the hosses!" She shook her head, her eyes wide with a reflection of the complete stupefaction that had descended upon her. "Laws A'mighty, what a ragin' devil that man is, honey! I'se seen men *an'* men—an' I knowed a nigger once that was——"

But Martha paused, for Marion was paying no attention to her. The girl was pulling some articles of wearing apparel from some drawers, packing them hurriedly into a small handbag, and Martha sprang quickly to help her, divining what the girl intended to do.

"That's right, honey; doan you stay heah in this house another minit! You git out as quick as you kin. You go right over to that Squint man's house an' tell him to

protect you. 'Cause you's goin' to need protection, honey — an' don't you forgit it!"

The girl's white face was an eloquent sign of her conception of the danger that confronted her. But she spoke no word while packing her handbag. When she was ready she turned to the door, to confront Martha, who also carried a satchel. Together the two went out of the house, crossed the level surrounding it, and began to descend the long slope that led down into the mighty basin in which, some hours before, the girl had seen the pin-point of light glimmering across the sea of darkness toward her. And toward that light, as toward a beacon that promised a haven from a storm, she went, Martha following.

From a window of the house a man watched them — Parsons — in the grip of a paralyzing terror, his pallid face pressed tightly against the glass of the window as he watched until he could see them no longer.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WRONG ANKLE

BUD HEMMINGWAY, the tall, red-faced young puncher who had assisted Quinton Taylor in the sprained-ankle deception, saw the dawn breaking through one of the windows of the bunkhouse when he suddenly opened his eyes after dreaming of steaming flapjacks soaked in the sirup he liked best. He stretched out on his back in the wall-bunk and licked his lips.

“Lordy, I’m hungry!”

But he decided to rest for a few minutes while he considered the cook — away with the outfit to a distant corner of the range.

He reflected bitterly that the cook was away most of the time, and that a man fared considerably better with the outfit than he did by staying at the home ranch. For one thing, when a man was with the outfit he got “grub,” without having to rustle it himself — that was why it was better to be with the outfit.

“A’ man don’t git nothin’ to eat at all, scarcely — when he’s got to rustle his own grub,” mourned Bud. “He’s got the appetite, all right, but he don’t know how to rassle the ingredients which goes into good grub. Take them

flapjacks, now." (He licked his lips again.) "They're scrumptuous. But that damned hyena which slings grub for the outfit won't tell a man how he makes 'em, which greediness is goin' to git him into a heap of trouble some day—when I git so hungry that I feel a heap reckless!"

Bud watched the dawn broaden. He knew he ought to get up, for this was the day on which Marion Harlan was to visit the Arrow—and Taylor had warned him to be on hand early to bandage the ankle again—Taylor having decided that not enough time had elapsed to effect a cure.

But Bud did not get up until a glowing shaft entering the window warned him that the sun was soon to appear above the horizon. Then he bounded out of the bunk and lurched heavily to an east window.

What he saw when he looked out made him gasp for breath and hang hard to the window-sill, while his eyes bulged and widened with astonishment. For upon the porch of the ranchhouse—seated in the identical chairs in which they *had* sat during their previous visit, were Marion Harlan and the negro woman!

Bud stepped back from the window and rubbed his eyes. Then he went to the window again and looked with all his vision. And then a grin covered his face.

For the two women seemed to be asleep. Bud would have sworn they were asleep! For the negress was hunched up in her chair—a big, almost shapeless black mass—with her chin hidden in the swell of her ample

bosom; while the girl was leaning back, her figure slack with the utter relaxation that accompanies deep sleep, her eyes closed and her hat a little awry. Bud was certain *she* was asleep, for no girl in her waking moments would permit her hat to rest upon her head in that negligent manner.

Bud scratched his head many times while hurriedly getting into his clothing.

"I'm bettin' *they* didn't wait for flapjacks *this* mornin'!" he confided to himself, mentally. "Must like it here a heap," he reflected. "Well, there's nothin' like gittin' an early start when you're goin' anywhere!" he grinned.

Stealthily he opened the door of the bunkhouse, watching furtively as he stepped out, lest he be seen; and then when he noted that the women did not move, he darted across the yard, vaulted the corral fence, ran around the corner of the ranchhouse, carefully opened a rear door, and presently stood beside a bed gently shaking its tousled-haired occupant.

"Git up, you sufferin' fool!" he whispered hoarsely; "they're here!"

Taylor's eyes snapped open and were fixed on Bud with a resentful glare, which instantly changed to reserved amusement when he saw Bud's bulging eyes and general evidence of suppressed excitement.

He yawned sleepily, stretching his arms wide.

"The outfit, eh? Well, tell Bothwell I'll see him ——"

"Bothwell, hell!" sneered Bud. "It ain't the outfit! It ain't no damned range boss! It's *her*, I tell you! An' if you're figgerin' on gittin' that ankle bandaged before—— That starts you to runnin', eh?" he jeered.

For Taylor was out of bed with one leap. In another he had Bud by the shoulders and had crowded him back against the wall.

"Bud," he said, "I've a notion to manhandle you! Didn't I tell you to have me up early?"

"Git your fingers out of my windpipe," objected Bud. "Early! Sufferin' shorthorns! Did you want me to git you up last night? It's only four, now — an' they've been here for hours, I reckon — mebbe all night. How's a man to know anything about a woman?"

Taylor was getting into his clothes. Bud watched him, marveling at his deft movements. "You're sure a wolf at hustlin' when *she's* around!" he offered.

But he got no reply. Taylor was dressed in a miraculously short time, and then he sat down on the edge of the bed and stuck a foot out toward Bud.

"Shut up, and get the bandage on!" he directed.

Bud dove for a dresser and pulled out a drawer, returning instantly with a roll of white cloth, which he unfolded as he knelt beside the bed. For an instant after kneeling he scratched his head, looking at Taylor's feet in perplexity, and then he looked up at Taylor, his face thoughtfully furrowed.

"Which ankle was it I bandaged before?" he demanded; "I've forgot!"

Taylor groaned. He, too, had forgotten. Since he had talked with Neil Norton about the ankle directly after the fight with Carrington in front of the courthouse he had tried in vain to remember which ankle he had bandaged for Miss Harlan's benefit. Driven to the necessity of making a quick decision, his brain became a mere muddle of desperate conjecture. Out of the muddle sprang a disgust for Bud for *his* poor memory.

"You've forgot!" he blurted at Bud. "Why, damn it, you ought to know which one it was—you bandaged it!"

"Well," grinned Bud gleefully, "it was *your* ankle, wasn't it? Strikes me that if I busted one of *my* ankles I wouldn't forget which one it was! Leastways, if I'd busted it just to hang around a girl!"

Taylor sneered scornfully. "You wouldn't bust an ankle for a girl—you ain't got backbone enough. Hell!" he exploded; "do something! Take a chance and bandage one of them—I don't care a damn which one! If she noticed the other time, I'll tell her that one was cured and I busted the other one!"

"She'd know you was lyin'," grinned Bud. He stood erect, his eyes alight with an inspiration. "Wrap up both of 'em!" he suggested. "If she goes to gittin' curious—which she will, bein' a woman—tell her you busted both of 'em!"

"It won't do," objected Taylor; "I couldn't lie that heavy an' keep a straight face."

Bud began to wrap the left ankle. As he worked, the doubt in his eyes began to fade and was succeeded by conviction. When he finished, he stood up and grinned at Taylor.

"That's the one," he said; "the left. I mind, now, that we talked about it. You go right out to her, limpin', the same as you done before, an' she'll not say a word about it. You'll see."

Taylor grunted disbelievingly, and hobbled to the front door. He looked back at Bud, who was snickering, made a malicious grimace at him, and softly opened the door.

Miss Harlan had been asleep, but she was not asleep when Taylor opened the door. Indeed, she was never more wide awake in her life. At the sound of the door opening she turned her head and sat stiffly erect, to face Taylor.

Taylor looked apologetically at his ankle, his cheeks tinged with a flush of embarrassment.

"This ankle, ma'am—it ain't quite well yet. You'll excuse me not being gone. But Bud—that's my friend—says it won't be quite right for a few days yet. But I won't be in your way—and I hope you enjoy yourself."

Miss Harlan was enjoying herself. She was enjoying herself despite the shadow of the tragedy that had almost descended upon her. And mirth, routing the bitter, re-

sentful emotions that had dwelt in her heart during the night, twitched mightily at her lips and threatened to curve them into a smile.

For during her last visit to the Arrow she had noted particularly that it had been Taylor's *right* ankle which had been bandaged, and now he appeared before her with the *left* swathed in white cloth!

But even had she not known, Taylor's face must have told her of the deception. For there was guilt in his eyes, and doubt, and a sort of breathless speculation, and — she was certain — an intense curiosity to discover whether or not she was aware of the trick.

But she looked straight at him, betraying nothing of the emotions that had seized her.

"Does it pain you *very* much?" she inquired.

Had not Taylor been so eager to make his case strong, he might have noted the exceedingly light sarcasm of her voice.

"It hurts a heap, ma'am," he declared. "Why, last night——"

"I shouldn't think it would be necessary to lie about an ankle," she said, coldly.

Taylor's face went crimson, and in his astonishment he stepped heavily upon the traitor foot and stood, convicted, before her, looking very much like a reproved schoolboy.

She rose from her chair, and now she turned from Taylor and stood looking out over the big level, while behind

her Taylor shifted his feet, scowled and felt decidedly uncomfortable.

From where Taylor watched her she looked very rigid and indignant—with her head proudly erect and her shoulders squared; and he could almost *feel* that her eyes were flashing with resentment.

Yet had he been able to see her face, he would have seen her lips twitching and her eyes dancing with a light that might have puzzled him. For she had already forgiven him.

"There's lies — *and* lies," he offered palliatively, breaking a painful silence.

There was no answer, and Taylor, desperately in earnest in his desire for forgiveness, and looking decidedly funny to Bud Hemmingway, who was watching from the interior of the room beyond the open door, walked across the porch with no suspicion of a limp, and halted near the girl.

"Shucks, Miss Harlan," he said. "I'm sure caught; and I'm admitting it was a sort of mean trick to pull off on you. But if you wanted to be near a girl you'd taken a shine to—that you liked a whole lot, I mean, Miss Harlan—and you couldn't think of any *good* excuse to be around her? You couldn't blame a man for that—could you? Besides," he added, when peering at the side of her face, he saw the twitching lips, ready to break into a smile, "I'll make it up to you!"

"How?" It was a strained voice that answered him.

"By manhandling Bud Hemmingway for wrapping up the wrong ankle, ma'am!" he declared.

Both heard a cackle of mirth from the room behind them. And both turned, to see Bud Hemmingway retreating through a door into the kitchen.

It might have been Bud's action that brought the smile to Miss Harlan's face, or it might have been that she had forgiven Taylor. But at any rate Taylor read the smile correctly, and he succeeded in looking properly repentant when he felt Miss Harlan's gaze upon him.

"I won't play any more tricks — on you," he declared. "You ain't holding it against me?"

"If you will promise not to harm Bud," she said.

"That goes," he agreed, and went into the house to get his discarded boot.

When he reappeared, Miss Harlan was again seated in the chair. Swiftly her thoughts had reverted to the incident of the night before, and her face was wan and pale, and her lips pressed tightly together in a brave effort to repress the emotions that rioted within her. In spite of her courage, and of her determination not to let Taylor know of what had happened to her, her eyes were moist and her lips quivering.

He stepped close to her and peered sharply at her, standing erect instantly, his face grave.

"Shucks!" he said, accusingly; "I wouldn't be called

hospitable —now, would I? Standing here, talking a lot of nonsense, and you—you must have started *early* to get here by this time!” Again he flashed a keen glance at her, and his voice leaped.

“Something has happened, Miss Harlan! What is it?”

She got up again and faced him, smiling, her eyes shining mistily through the moisture in them. She was almost on the verge of tears, and her voice was tremulous when she answered:

“Mr. Taylor, I—I have come to ask if you—still—if your offer about the Arrow is still open—if—I could stay here—myself and Martha; if I could accept the offer you made about giving me father’s share of the Arrow. For—for—I can’t go back East—to Westwood, and I won’t stay in the Huggins house a minute longer!”

“Sure!” he said, with a grim smile, aware of her profound emotion; aware, too, that something had gone terribly wrong with her—to make her accept what she had once considered charity—an offer made out of his regard for her father.

“But, look here,” he added. “What’s wrong? There’s something——”

“Plenty, Mr. Squint.”

This was Martha. She had been awake for some little time, sitting back with her eyes closed, listening. She was now sitting erect, her eyes shining with eagerness to tell all she knew of the night’s happenings.

"Plenty, Mr. Squint," she repeated, paying no attention to Miss Harlan's sharp, "Martha!" "That big rapsallion, Carrington, has been makin' things mighty mis'able for Missy Harlan. He come to the house las' night an' bust the door down, tryin' to git at missy, an' she's run away from him like a whitehead. Then, when he finds he can't diskiver where I hide missy he run the hosses off an' we have to walk heah. That's all, Mr. Squint, 'ceptin' that me an' missy doan stay in that house no more—if we have to walk East—all the way!"

Miss Harlan saw a flash light Taylor's eyes; saw the flash recede, to be replaced by a chilling glow. And his lips grew straight and stiff—two hard lines pressed firmly together. She saw his chest swell and noted the tenseness of his muscles as he stepped closer to her.

"Was your uncle there with you, Miss Harlan?"

She nodded, and saw his lips curve with a mirthless smile.

"What did Carrington do?" The passion in his voice made an icy shiver run over her—she felt the terrible earnestness that had come over him, and a pulse of fear gripped her.

She had never felt more like crying than at this instant, and until this minute she had not known how deeply she had been affected by Carrington's conduct, nor how tired she was, nor how she had yearned for the sympathy Taylor was giving her. But she felt that something in

Taylor's manner portended violence, and she did not want him to risk his life fighting Carrington—for her.

"You see," she explained, "Mr. Carrington did not really *do* anything. He just came there, and was impertinent, and impudent, and insulting. And he told me that he had bought the house; that it didn't belong to uncle—though I thought it did; and that the people of Dawes—and everywhere—would think—things—about me—as the people of Westwood had—thought. And I—I—why, I just couldn't stay——"

"That's enough, Miss Harlan. So Carrington didn't do anything." His voice was vibrant with some sternly repressed passion.

"So you walked all the way here, and you have had no breakfast," he said, shortly. He turned toward the front door, his voice snapping like the report of a rifle:

"Bud!"

And, looking through the doorway, Miss Harlan saw Bud jump as though he had been shot. He appeared in the doorway, serious-faced and alert.

"Rustle some breakfast—quick! And hoe out that spare bedroom. Jump!"

Taylor understood perfectly what had happened, for he remembered what he had overheard between Carrington and Parsons on the train. To be sure, Miss Harlan knew nothing about the conversation, and so she mentally commended Taylor's quickness of perception, and felt grate-

ful to him because he had spared her the horror of explaining further.

She sat down again, aware of the startling unconvictionality of this visit and of the conversation that had resulted from it, but oppressed with no sense of shame. For it seemed entirely natural that she should have come to Taylor, though she supposed that was because he had been her father's friend, and that she had no other person to go to — not even if she went East, to Westwood. But she would not have mentioned what had happened at the big house if Martha had not taken the initiative.

She was startled over the change that had come in Taylor. Watching him covertly as he stood near her, and following his movements as he walked around in the room, helping Bud, generously leaving her to herself and her thoughts, she looked in vain for that gentleness and subtle thoughtfulness that hitherto had seemed to distinguish him. She had admired him for his easy-going manner, the slow deliberateness of his glances, the quizzical gleam of his eyes.

But she saw him now as many of the men in this section of the country had seen him when he faced the necessity for rapid, determined action. It was the other side of his character; before she had heard his voice, and before she had seen him smile — the stern, unyielding side of him which she had discovered always was ready for the blows of adversity and enmity — his fighting side.

And when she went into the house to breakfast, feeling the strangeness of it all — of the odd fate which had led her to the Arrow; the queer reluctance that affected her over the action in accepting the hospitality of a man who — except for his association with her father — was almost a stranger to her — she found that he did not intend to insinuate his presence upon her.

He called her, and stood near the table when she and Martha went in. Then he told her gravely that the house was "hers," and that he and Bud would live in the bunkhouse.

"And when you get settled," he told her, as he stood in the doorway, ready to go, "we'll write those articles of partnership. And," he added, "don't you go to worrying about Carrington. If he comes here, and Bud or me ain't here, you'll find a loaded rifle hanging behind the front door. Don't be afraid to use it — there's no law against killing snakes out here!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BEAST AGAIN

CARRINGTON was conscious of the error his unrestrained passion had driven him to committing. Yet he had not been sincere when he had declared to Martha that he wouldn't bother the girl again. For after leading the two horses to Dawes and arranging for their care, he hunted up Danforth. It was nearly midnight when Danforth reached Carrington's rooms in the Castle, and Carrington was in a sullen mood.

"I want two or three men who will do what they are told and keep their mouths shut," he told Danforth. "Get them—quick—and send them to the Huggins house—mine, now—and have them stay there. Nobody is to leave the house—not even to come to town. Understand? Not even Parsons. Hustle! There is no train out of here tonight? No? Well, that's all right. Get going!"

Danforth had noticed Carrington's sullenness, and the strained excitement of his manner, and there was in Danforth's mind an inclination to warn Carrington about including the woman in the scheme to subjugate Dawes—for he knew Carrington of old; but a certain light in the

big man's eyes warned Danforth and he shut his half-opened lips and departed on his errand.

In an hour he returned, telling Carrington that his orders had been obeyed.

Danforth seated himself in a chair near one of the front windows and waited, for he knew Carrington still had something to say to him—the man's eyes told him, for they were alight with a cold, speculative gleam as they rested on Danforth.

At last, after a silence that lasted long, Carrington said, shortly:

“What do you know about Taylor?”

“What I told you before—the first day. And that isn't much.”

“I had a talk with Parsons the other day—about Larry Harlan,” said Carrington. “It seems that Larry Harlan worked for Taylor—for two or three years. I didn't question Parsons closely about the connection between Taylor and Harlan, but it seems to me that Parsons mentioned a mine. What about it? Do you know anything about it?”

Danforth related what he knew regarding the incident of the mine—the story told by Taylor when he returned after Larry Harlan's death—and Carrington's eyes gleamed with interest.

“Do you think he told a straight story?” he asked.

He watched Danforth intently.

"Hell, yes!" declared the other. "He's too square to lie!"

Five minutes later Carrington said good-night to Danforth. But Carrington did not immediately go to bed; he sat for a long time in a chair near the window looking out at the buildings of Dawes.

In the courtroom early the next morning he leaned over Judge Littlefield's desk, smiling.

"Did you ever hear of Quinton Taylor being connected with a mining venture?"

"Well, rather."

"Where?"

"At Nogel—in the Sangre de Christo Mountains."

"How far is that?"

"About ten miles—due west."

"What do you know about the mine?"

"Very little. Taylor and a man named Lawrence Harlan registered the claim here. I heard that Harlan died—was killed in an accident. Soon afterward, Taylor sold the mine—to a man named Thornton—for a consideration, not mentioned." The judge looked sharply at Carrington. "Why this inquiry?" he asked; "do you think there is anything wrong about the transaction?"

"There is no determining that until an investigation is made." Carrington laughed as he left the judge.

Later he got on his horse and rode to the big house. On the front porch, seated in a chair, smoking, he saw

one of the men Danforth had sent in obedience to his order; at the rear of the house was another; and, lounging carelessly on the grass near the edge of the butte fringing the big valley, he saw still another—men who seemed to find their work agreeable, for they grinned at Carrington when he rode up.

Carrington dismounted and entered the house—by one of the rear doors—which he had wrecked the night before. He went in boldly, grinning, for he anticipated that by this time Marion Harlan would have reached that stage of intimidation where she would no longer resist him.

At first he was only mildly disturbed at the appearance of the interior; for nothing had been done to bring order out of the chaos he had created the night before, and the condition of the furniture, and the atmosphere of gloomy emptiness that greeted him indicated nothing. The terror under which the girl had labored during the night might still be gripping her.

He had no suspicion that the girl had left the house until after he had looked into all the rooms but the one occupied by Parsons. Then a conviction that she *had* fled seized him; he scowled and leaped to the door of Parsons' room, pounding heavily upon it.

Parsons did not answer his knock, and an instant later, when Carrington forced the door and stepped into the room, he saw Parsons standing near a window, pallid and shaking.

With a bound Carrington reached Parsons' side and gripped the man by the collar of his coat.

"Where's Miss Harlan?" he demanded. He noted that Parsons swayed in his grasp, and he peered at the other with a malignant joy. He had always hated Parsons, tolerating him because of Parsons' money.

"She's gone," whispered Parsons tremulously. "I—I tried to stop her, knowing you wouldn't want it, but—she went away—anyway."

"Where?" Carrington's fingers were gripping Parsons' shoulder near the throat with a bitter, viselike strength that made the man cringe and groan from the pain of it.

"Don't, Jim; for God's sake, don't! You're hurting me! I—I couldn't help it; I couldn't stop her!"

The abject, terrified appeal in his eyes; the fawning, doglike subjection of his manner, enraged Carrington. He shook the little man with a force that racked the other from head to heel.

"Where did she go—damn you!"

"To the Arrow."

Aroused to desperation by the flaming fury that blazed in Carrington's eyes, Parsons tried to wrench himself free, tugging desperately, and whining: "Don't, Jim!" For he knew that he was to be punished for his dereliction.

He shrieked when Carrington struck him; a sound

which died in his throat as the blow landed. Carrington left him lie where he fell, and went out to the men, interrogating the one he had seen on the front porch.

From that person he learned that no one had left the house since the men had come; so that Carrington knew Marion must have departed soon after he had left the night before—or some time during the time of his departure and the arrival of the men.

Ten minutes after emerging from the house he went in again. Parsons was sitting on the floor of his room, swaying weakly back and forth, whining tonelessly, his lips loose and drooling blood.

For an instant Carrington stood over him, looking down at him with a merciless, tigerlike grin. Then he stooped, gripped Parsons by the shoulders, and, lifting him bodily, threw him across the bed. Parsons did not resist, but lay, his arms flung wide, watching the big man fearfully.

“Don’t hit me again, Jim!” he pleaded. “Jim, I’ve never done anything to you!”

“Bah!” Carrington leaned over the other, grinning malevolently.

“You’ve double-crossed me, Elam,” he said silkily. “You’re through. Get out of here before I kill you! I want to; and if you are here in five minutes, I shall kill you! Go to the Arrow—with your niece. Tell her what you know about me—if you haven’t done so al-

ready. And tell her that I am coming for her — and for Taylor, too! Now, get out!”

In less than five minutes, while Carrington was at the front of the house talking with the three men, Parsons tottered from a rear door, staggered weakly into some dense shrubbery that skirted the far side of the house, and made his slow way toward the big slope down which Marion and Martha had gone some hours before.

Retribution had descended swiftly upon Parsons; it seemed to him he was out of it, crushed and beaten. But no thread of philosophy weaved its way through the fabric of the man's complete misery and humiliation, and no reflection that he had merely reaped what he had sown glimmered in his consciousness. He was merely conscious that he had been beaten and robbed by the man who had always been his confederate, and as he reeled down the big slope on his way to the Arrow he whined and moaned in a toneless voice of vengeance — and more vengeance.

CHAPTER XIX

THE AMBUSH

THE incident of the fight between Carrington, Danforth, Judge Littlefield, and Taylor in front of the courthouse had eloquently revealed a trait of Taylor's character which was quite generally known to the people of Dawes, and which, in a great measure, accounted for Taylor's popularity.

Few of Dawes's citizens had ever seen Taylor angry. Neil Norton had seen him in a rage once, and the memory of the man's face was still vivid. A few of the town's citizens had watched him once—when he had thrashed a gunman who had insulted him—and the story of that fight still taxed the vocabularies of those who had witnessed it. One enthusiastic watcher, at the conclusion of the fight, had picturesquely termed Taylor a "regular he-wolf in a scrap;" and thus there was written into the traditions of the town a page of his history which carried the lesson, repeated by many tongues:

"Don't rile Taylor!"

Riding into Dawes about two hours after he had heard from Marion Harlan the story of the attack on her by Carrington, Taylor's face was set and grim. His ancient

hatred of Carrington was intensified by another passion that had burned its way into his heart, filling it with a primitive lust to destroy — jealousy.

He dismounted in front of the Castle Hotel, and, entering, he asked the clerk where he could find Carrington. The clerk could give him no information, and Taylor went out, the clerk's puzzled gaze following him.

"Evidently he doesn't want to congratulate Carrington about anything," the clerk confided to a bystander.

Mounting his horse, Taylor rode down the street to the building which Danforth had selected as a place from which to administer the government of Dawes. A gilt sign over the front bore upon it the words:

CITY HALL.

Taylor went inside, and found Danforth seated at a desk. The latter looked sourly at his visitor until he caught a glimpse of his eyes, then his face paled, and he sat silent until Taylor spoke:

"Where's Carrington?"

"I haven't seen Carrington this morning," lied Danforth, for he *had* seen Carrington some time before, riding out of town toward the Huggins house. He suspected Carrington's errand was in some way concerned with the three men who had been sent there. But he divined from the expression in Taylor's eyes that trouble between Taylor and Carrington was imminent, and he

would not set Taylor on the other's trail without first warning Carrington.

He met Taylor's straight, cold look of disbelief with a vindictive smirk, which grew venomous as Taylor wheeled and walked out. Taylor had not gone far when Danforth called a man to his side, whispered rapidly to him, telling him to hurry. Later the man slipped out of the rear door of the building, mounted a horse, and rode hurriedly down the river trail toward the Huggins house.

Taylor rode to the *Eagle* office, but Norton was not there, and so, pursuing his quest, Taylor looked into saloons and stores, and various other places. Men who knew him noted his taciturnity — for he spoke little except to greet a friend here and there shortly — and commented upon his abrupt manner.

"What's up with Taylor?" asked a man who knew him. "Looks sort of riled."

Taylor found Carrington in none of the places in which he looked. He returned to the *Eagle* office, and found Norton there. He greeted Norton with a short:

"Seen Carrington?"

"Why, yes." Norton peered closely at his friend. "What in blazes is wrong?" His thoughts went to another time, when he had seen Taylor as he appeared now, and he drew a deep breath.

Briefly Taylor told him, and when the tale was ended, Norton's eyes were blazing with indignation.

"So, that's the kind of a whelp he is!" he said. "Well," he added, "I saw him go out on the river trail a while ago; it's likely he's gone to the Huggins house."

"His—now," said Taylor; "that's what makes it worse. Well," he added as he stepped toward the door, "I'll be going."

"Be careful, Squint," warned Norton, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I know you can lick him—and I hope you give him all that's coming to him. But watch him—he's tricky!" He paused. "If you need any help—someone to go with you, to keep an eye——"

"It's a one-man job," grinned Taylor mirthlessly.

"You'll promise you won't be thinking of that ankle—this time?" said Norton seriously.

Taylor permitted himself a faint smile. "That's all explained now," he said. "She's been a lot generous—and forgiving. No," he added, "I won't be thinking of that ankle—now!"

And then, his lips setting again, he crossed the sidewalk, mounted Spotted Tail, and rode through town to the river trail. Watching him, Norton saw him disappear in some timber that fringed the river.

Carrington had finished his talk with the three men he had set to guard the Huggins house. The men were told to stay until they received orders from Carrington

to leave. And they were to report to him immediately if anyone came.

Carrington had watched Parsons go down the big slope; and for a long time after he had finished his talk with the three men he stood on the front porch of the house watching the progress made by Parsons through the basin.

"Following Marion," Carrington assured himself, with a crooked smile. "Well, I'll know where to get both of them when I want them."

Carrington felt not the slightest tremor of pity for Parsons. He laughed deep in his throat with a venomous joy as he saw Parsons slowly making his way through the big basin; for he knew Parsons—he knew that the craven nature of the man would prevent him from attempting any reprisal of a vigorous character.

Yet the exultation in the big man's heart was dulled with a slight regret for his ruthless attack on Marion Harlan. He should not have been so eager, he told himself; he should have waited; he should have insinuated himself into her good graces, and then——

Scowling, he got on his horse and rode up the Dawes trail, shouting a last word of caution to the three men—one seated on the front porch, the other two lounging in the shade of a tree near by.

Half a mile from the house, riding through a timber grove, he met the man Danforth had sent to him. The

latter gave Carrington the message he carried, which was merely: "Taylor is looking for you."

"Coming here?" he asked the man sharply.

"I reckon he will be—if he can't find you in town," said the man. "Danforth said Taylor was a heap fussed up, an' killin' mad!"

A grayish pallor stole over Carrington's face, and he drew a quick breath, sending a rapid, dreading glance up the Dawes trail. Then, coincident with a crafty backward look—toward the Huggins house—the grayish pallor receded and a rush of color suffused his face. He spoke shortly to the man:

"Sneak back—by a roundabout trail. Don't let Taylor see you!"

He watched while the man urged his horse deep into the fringing timber. Carrington could see him for a time as he rode, and then, when horse and rider had vanished, Carrington wheeled his horse and sent it clattering back along the trail to the big house.

Arriving there, he called the three men to him and talked fast to them. The talk ended, the men ran for their horses, and a few minutes later they raced up the river trail toward Dawes, their faces grim, their eyes alert.

About a mile up the trail, where a wood of spruce and fir-balsam spread dark shadows over the ground, and an almost impenetrable growth of brush fringed the narrow,

winding path over which any rider going to the big house must pass, they separated, two plunging deep into the brush on one side, and one man secreting himself on the other side.

They urged their horses far back, where they could not be seen. And then, concealing themselves behind convenient bushes, they waited, their eyes trained on the Dawes trail, their ears attuned to catch the slightest sound that might come from that direction.

Back at the big house—having arranged the ambuscade—Carrington drew a deep breath of relief and smiled evilly. He thought he knew why Taylor was looking for him. Marion had gone to the Arrow, to tell Taylor what had happened at the big house, and Taylor, in a jealous rage, intended to punish him. Well, Taylor could come now.

CHAPTER XX

A FIGHT TO A FINISH

AND Taylor was "coming." The big black horse he was riding — which he had named "Spotted Tail" because of the white blotches that startlingly relieved his somber sable coat — was never in better condition. He stepped lightly, running in long, smooth leaps down the narrow trail, champing at the bit, keen of eye, alert, eager, snorting his impatience over the tight rein his rider kept on him.

But Spotted Tail was not more eager than his rider. Taylor, however, knowing that at any instant he might run plump into Carrington, returning from the big house, was forced to restrain his impatience. Therefore, except on the straight reaches of the trail, he was forced to pull the black down.

But they were traveling fast when they reached the timber grove in which Carrington's men were concealed; and yet on the damp earth of the trail, where the sunlight could not penetrate, and where the leaves of past summers had fallen, to rot and weave a pulpy carpet, the rush of Spotted Tail's passing created little sound.

Within a hundred feet of the spot where Carrington's

men were concealed, Spotted Tail shot his ears forward stiffly and raised his muzzle inquiringly. Taylor, noting the action, and suspecting that instinct had warned Spotted Tail of the approach of another horse, drew the animal down and rode forward at a walk, for he felt that it must be Carrington's horse which was approaching.

Rounding a sharp turn in the trail, Taylor could look ahead for perhaps a hundred feet. He saw no rider advancing toward him, and he leaned forward, slapping the black's neck in playful reproach.

As he moved he heard the heavy crash of a pistol shot and felt the bullet sing past his head. Another pistol barked venomously from some brush on his right, and still another from his left.

But none of the bullets struck Taylor. For the black horse, startled by Taylor's playful movement when all his senses were strained to detect the location of his kind on the trail, had made an involuntary forward leap, thus whisking his rider out of the line of fire. And before either of the three men could shoot again, Spotted Tail had flashed down the trail—a streak of somber black against the green background of the trees.

He fled over the hundred feet of straight trail and had vanished around a bend before the Carrington men could move their weapons around impeding branches of the brush that covered them. There was no stopping Spotted Tail now, for he was in a frenzy of terror—and

he made a mere rushing black blot as he emerged from the timber and fled across an open space toward another wood—the wood that surrounded the big house.

Standing on the front porch of the big house, nervously smoking a cigar, his face set in sullen lines, his eyes fixed on the Dawes trail, Carrington heard the shots. He sighed, grinned maliciously, and relaxed his vigilance.

“He’s settled by now,” he said.

He looked at one of the chairs standing on the porch, thought of sitting in one of them to await the coming of the three men, decided he was too impatient to sit, and began walking back and forth on the porch.

He had thrown a half-smoked cigar away and was lighting another when he saw a black blot burst from the edge of a timber-clump beyond an open space. The match flared and went out as Carrington held it to the end of the cigar, for there was something strangely familiar in the shape of the black blot—even with it heading directly toward him. An instant later, the blot looming larger in his vision, Carrington dropped cigar and match and stood staring with wild, fear-haunted eyes at the rushing black horse.

Carrington stood motionless a little longer—until the black horse, its rider sitting straight in the saddle, in cowboy fashion, reached the edge of the wood surrounding the house. Then Carrington, cursing, his lips in a hideous pout, drew a pistol from a hip-pocket. And when the

black horse was within fifty feet of him, and still coming at a speed which there was no gauging, Carrington leveled the pistol.

Once — twice — three, four, five, six times he pulled the trigger of the weapon. Carrington saw a grim, mocking smile on the rider's face, and knew none of his bullets had taken effect.

Unarmed now, he was suddenly stricken with a panic of fear; and while the rider of the black horse was dismounting at the edge of the porch, Carrington dove for the front door of the house and vanished inside, slamming the door behind him, directly in the rider's face.

When Taylor threw the door open he saw Carrington, far back in the room, swinging a chair over his head. At Taylor's appearance he threw the chair with all the force his frenzy of fear could put into the effort. Taylor ducked, and the chair flew past him, sailing uninterruptedly outside and over the porch railing.

Carrington ran through the big front room, through the next room — the sitting-room — knocking chairs over in his flight, throwing a big center table at his silent, implacable pursuer. He slammed the sitting-room door and tried to lock it, but he could not turn the key quickly enough, and Taylor burst the door open, almost plunging against Carrington as he came through it.

Carrington ran into the dining-room, shoved the dining-room table in Taylor's way as Taylor tried to reach

him; but Taylor leaped over the obstruction, and when Carrington dodged into Marion Harlan's room, Taylor was so close that he might have grasped the big man.

Taylor had said no word. The big man saw two guns swinging at Taylor's hips, and he wondered vaguely why the man did not use them. It occurred to Carrington as he plunged through Marion Harlan's room into Martha's, and from there to the kitchen, and back again to the dining-room, that Taylor was not going to shoot him, and his panic partially left him.

And yet there was a gleam in Taylor's eyes that made his soul cringe in terror — the cold, bitter fury of a peace-loving man thoroughly aroused.

Twice, as Taylor pursued Carrington through the sitting-room again and into another big room that adjoined it, Carrington's courage revived long enough to permit him to consider making a stand against Taylor, but each time as he stiffened with the determination, the terrible rage in Taylor's eyes dissuaded him, and he continued to evade the clash.

But he knew that the clash must come, and when, in their rapid, headlong movements, Carrington came close to the front door and tried to slip out of it, Taylor lunged against him and struck at him, the fist just grazing Carrington's jaw, the big man understood that Taylor was intent on beating him with his fists.

Had it not been for his previous encounter with Taylor,

Carrington would not have hesitated, for he knew how to protect himself in a fight; but there was something in Taylor's eyes now to add to the memory of that other fight, and Carrington wanted no more of it.

But at last he was forced to stand. Ducking to evade the blow aimed at his jaw when he tried to dart out of the front door, he slipped. Reeling, in an effort to regain his equilibrium, he plunged into another big room. It was a room that was little used—an old-fashioned parlor, kept trim and neat against the coming of visitors, but a room whose gloominess the occupants of the house usually avoided.

The shades were down, partly concealing heavy wooden blinds—which were closed. And the only light in the room was that which came from a little square window high up in the side wall.

Before Carrington could regain his balance Taylor had entered the room. He closed the door behind him, placed his back against it, locked it, and grinned feline at the big man.

"Your men are coming, Carrington," he said—"hear them?" In the silence that followed his words both stood, listening to the beat of hoofs near the house. "They'll be trying to get in here in a minute," went on Taylor. "But before they get in I'm going to knock your head off!" And without further warning he was upon Carrington, striking bitterly.

It seemed to Carrington that the man was endowed with a savage strength entirely out of proportion to his stature, and that he was able to start terrific, deadening blows from any angle. For though Carrington was a strong man and had had some fighting experience, he could neither evade Taylor's blows nor stand against the impact of them.

He went reeling around the room under the impetus of Taylor's terrible rushes, struggling to defend himself, to dodge, to clinch, to evade somehow the fists that were flying at him from all directions. He could not get an instant's respite in which to set himself. Three times in succession he was knocked down so heavily that the house shook with the crash of his body striking the floor, and each time when he got to his feet he tried to fight Taylor off in an endeavor to set himself for a blow. But he could not. He was knocked against the walls of the room, and hammered away from them with stiff, jolty, venomous blows that jarred him from head to heels. He tried vainly to cover up — with his arms locked about his head he crouched and tried to rush Taylor off his feet, knowing he was stronger than the other, and that his only hope was in clinching. But Taylor held him off with savage uppercuts and terrific short-arm swings that smashed his lips.

He began to mutter in a whining, vicious monotone; twice he kicked at Taylor, and twice he was knocked down

as a punishment for his foul methods. Finding his methods ineffectual, and discovering that covering his face with his arms did not materially lessen the punishment he was receiving, he began to stand up straight, taking blows in an effort to land one.

But Taylor eluded him; Carrington's blows did not land. Raging and muttering, roaring with impotent passion, he whipped the air with his arms, almost jerking them out of their sockets.

Stiff and taut, his muscles accommodating themselves to every demand he made on them, and in perfect co-ordination with his brain—and the purpose of his brain to inflict upon Carrington the maximum of punishment for his dastardly attack on Marion Harlan—Taylor worked fast and furiously. For he heard Carrington's three men in the next room; he heard them try the door; heard them call to Carrington.

And then, convinced that the fight must be ended quickly, before the men should break down the door and have him at a disadvantage, Taylor finished it. He smothered Carrington with a succession of stiff-arm, straight punches that glazed the other's eyes and sent him reeling around the room. And, at last, over in a corner near the little window, Carrington went down flat on his back, his eyes closed, his arms flung wide.

Panting from his exertions, Taylor drew his guns and ran to one of the front windows. They opened upon the

porch, and, peering through the blinds, Taylor saw one of the men standing at one of the windows, trying to peer into the room. The other two, Taylor knew, were at the door—he could hear them talking in the silence that had followed the final falling of Carrington.

With a gun in each hand, Taylor approached the door. He was compelled to sheath one of the guns, finding that it interfered with the turning of the key in the lock; and he had sheathed it and was slowly turning the key, intending to throw the door open suddenly and take his chance with the two men on the other side of it, when he saw a shadow darken the little window above where Carrington lay.

He wheeled quickly, saw a man's face at the window, caught the glint of a pistol. He snapped a shot at the man, swinging his gun over his head to keep it from striking the door as he turned. But at the movement the man's pistol roared, glass tinkling on the floor with the report. The air in the room rocked with the explosion of Taylor's pistol, but a heavy blow on Taylor's left shoulder, accompanied by a twinge of pain, as though a white-hot iron had suddenly been plunged through it, spoiled Taylor's aim, and his bullet went into the ceiling. As he staggered back from the door he saw the man's face at the window, set in a triumphant grin. Then, as Taylor flattened against the wall to steady himself for another shot, the face disappeared.

For an instant Taylor rested against the wall, his arms outstretched along it to keep himself from falling, for the bullet which had struck him had hurt him badly. The wound was in the left shoulder, though, and high, and therefore not dangerous, yet he knew it had robbed his left arm of most of its strength—there was no feeling in the fingers that groped along the wall.

He stepped again to the door and softly turned the key in the lock. He heard no sound in the room beyond the door, and, thinking that the men, curious over the shooting, had gone outside, he jerked the door open.

The movement was greeted with deafening report and a smoke-streak that blinded Taylor momentarily. In just the instant before the smoke-streak Taylor had caught a glimpse of a man standing near the center of the room beyond the door, and though he was rather disconcerted by the powder-flash and the searing of his left cheek by a bullet, he let his own gun off twice in as many seconds, and had the grim satisfaction of seeing the man stagger and tumble headlong to the floor.

Taylor peered once at the man, to see if he needed further attention, decided he did not, and ran toward the front door, which opened upon the porch.

He was just in time to see one of Carrington's men sticking his head around a corner of the house. It was the man who had shot him from the little window. Taylor's gun and the man's roared simultaneously. Taylor

had missed, for the man dodged back, and Taylor staggered, for the man's bullet had struck him in the left thigh. He leaped, though limping, toward the corner, and when almost there a pistol crashed behind him, the bullet hitting his left shoulder, near where the other had gone in, the force of it spinning him clear around, so that he reeled and brought up against a porch column where it joined the rail.

Grimly setting himself, grinning bitterly with the realization that the men had him between them, Taylor stood momentarily, fighting to overcome the terrible weakness that had stolen over him. His knees were trembling, the house, trees, and sky were agitated in sickening convolutions, and yet when he saw the head of a man appear from around a corner of the house at his right, he snapped a shot at it, and instantly as it was withdrawn he staggered to the corner, lurching heavily as he went, and turning just as he reached it to reply to a shot sent at him from the other corner of the house.

A smoke-spurt met him as he reeled around the corner nearest him, and his knees sagged as he aimed his gun at a blurring figure in front of him. He saw the man go down, but his own strength was spent, and he knew the last bullet had struck him in a vital spot.

Staggering drunkenly, he started for the side of the house and brought up against it with a crash. Again, as he had done inside the house, he stretched his arms

out, flattening himself against the wall, but this time the arms were hanging more limply.

He was seeing things through a crimson haze, and raising a hand, he wiped his eyes—and could see better, though there was a queer dimness in his vision and the world was still traveling in eccentric circles.

He saw a blur in front of him—two men, he thought, though he knew he had accounted for two of the three gunmen who had followed him to the house. Then he heard a laugh—coarse and brutal—in a voice that he knew—Carrington's.

With heartbreaking effort he brought up his right hand, bearing the pistol. He was trying to swing it around to bring it to bear upon one of the two dancing figures in front of him, when a crushing blow landed on his head, and he knew one of the men had struck him with a fist. He felt his own weapon go off at last—it seemed he had been an age pressing on the trigger—and he heard a voice again—Carrington's—saying: "Damn him; he's shot me!" He laughed aloud as a gun roared close to him; he felt another twinge of pain somewhere around where the other twinges had come—or on the other side—he did not know; and he sank slowly, still pressing the trigger of his pistol, though not knowing whether or not he was doing any damage. And then the eccentrically whirling world became a black blur, soundless and void.

CHAPTER XXI

A MAN FACES DEATH

TAYLOR'S last shot, when he had been automatically pressing the trigger after Carrington had struck him viciously with his fist, had brought down the last of the three men who had ambushed him. And one of his last bullets had struck Carrington, who had recovered consciousness and staggered out of the house in time to see the end of the fight. And the big man, in a black, malignant fury of hatred, was staggering toward Taylor, lifting a foot to kick him, when from the direction of the clearing in front of the house came a voice, hoarse and vibrant with a cold, deadly rage:

"One kick an' I blow the top of your head off!"

Carrington stopped short and wheeled, to face Ben Mullarky.

The Irishman's eyes were blazing with wrath, and as he came forward, peering at the figures lying on the ground near the house, Carrington retreated, holding up his hands.

"Three of ye pilin' on one, eh?" said Mullarky as he looked down at Taylor, huddled against the side of the house. "An' ye got him, too, didn't ye? I've a

domn big notion to blow the top of your head off, anny way. Ye slope, ye big limb of the divvle, or I'll do it!"

Mullarky watched while Carrington mounted his horse and rode up the river trail toward Dawes, and the instant Carrington was out of sight, Mullarky was down on his knees beside Taylor, taking a lightning inventory of his wounds.

"Four of them, looks like!" he muttered thickly, his voice shaking with pity for the slack, limp, smoke-blackened figure that lay silent, the trace of a smile on its face. "An' two of them through the shoulder!" He paused, awed. "Lord, what a shindy!"

Then, swiftly gulping down his sympathy and his rage, Mullarky ran to his horse, which he had left at the edge of the wood when he had heard the shooting. He led the animal back to where Taylor lay, tenderly lifted Taylor in his arms, walked to the horse, and after much labor got Taylor up in front of him on the horse, Taylor's weight resting on his legs, the man's head and shoulders resting against him, to ease the jars of the journey.

Then he started, traveling as swiftly as possible down the big slope toward his own house, not so very far away.

Spotted Tail, jealously watching his master, saw him lifted to the back of the other horse. Shrewdly suspecting that all was not going well, and that his master would need him presently, Spotted Tail trotted after Mullarky.

In this manner, with Spotted Tail a few paces in his rear, Mullarky, still tenderly carrying his burden, reached his cabin.

He stilled Mrs. Mullarky's hysterical questions with a short command:

"Hitch up the buckboard while I'm gettin' him in shape!"

And then, while Mrs. Mullarky did as she was bidden, Mullarky carried Taylor inside the cabin, bathed his wounds, stanching the flow of blood as best he could—and came out again, carrying Taylor, and placed him in the bed of the light spring-wagon, upon some quilts—and upon a pillow that Mrs. Mullarky ran into the house to get, emerging with the reproach:

"You'd be lettin' him ride on them hard boards!"

Following Mullarky's instructions, Mrs. Mullarky climbed to the driver's seat and sent the buckboard toward the Arrow, driving as fast as she thought she dared. And Ben Mullarky, on Spotted Tail, turned his face toward Dawes, riding as he had never ridden before.

Parsons had reached the Arrow shortly after Taylor had departed for Dawes. The man had stopped at the Mullarky cabin to inquire the way from the lady, and she had frankly commented upon Parsons' battered appearance.

"So it was Carrington that mauled you, eh?" she said.

“Well, he’s a mighty evil man—the divvle take his sowl!”

Parsons concurred in this view of Carrington, though he did not tell Mrs. Mullarky so. He went on his way, refusing the good woman’s proffer of a horse, for he wanted to go afoot to the Arrow. He felt sure of Marion’s sympathy, but he wanted to make himself as pitiable an object as possible. And as he walked toward the Arrow he mentally dramatized the moment of his appearance at the ranchhouse—a bruised and battered figure dragging itself wearily forward, dusty, thirst-tortured, and despairing. He knew that spectacle would win the girl’s swift sympathy. The fact that the girl herself had been through almost the same experience did not affect him at all—he did not even think of it.

And when Parsons reached the Arrow the scene was even as he had dreamed it—Marion Harlan had seen him from afar, and came running to him, placing an arm about him, helping him forward, whispering words of sympathy in his ears, so that Parsons really began to look upon himself as a badly abused martyr.

Marion cared for him tenderly, once she got him into the ranchhouse. She bathed his bruised face, prepared breakfast for him, and later, learning from him that he had not slept during the night, she sent him off to bed, asking him as he went into the room if he had seen Ben Mullarky.

"For," she added, "he came here early this morning, after Mr. Taylor left, and I sent him to the big house to get some things for me."

But Parsons had not seen Mullarky.

And at last, when the morning was nearly gone, and Marion saw a horse-drawn vehicle approaching the Arrow from the direction of Dawes, she ran out, thinking Ben Mullarky had brought her "things" in his buckboard. But it was not Ben who was coming, but Mrs. Mullarky. The lady's face was very white and serious, and when the girl came close and she saw the look on the good woman's face, she halted in her tracks and stood rigid, her own face paling.

"Why, Mrs. Mullarky, what has happened?"

"Enough, deary." Mrs. Mullarky waved an eloquent hand toward the rear of the buckboard, and slowly approaching, the girl saw the huddled figure lying there, swathed in quilts.

She drew her breath sharply, and with pallid face, swaying a little, she walked to the rear of the buckboard and stood, holding hard to the rim of a wheel, looking down at Taylor's face with its closed eyes and its ghastly color.

She must have screamed, then, for she felt Mrs. Mullarky's arms around her, and she heard the lady's voice, saying: "Don't, deary; he ain't dead, yet — an' he won't die — we won't let him die."

She stood there by the buckboard for a time—until Mrs. Mullarky, running to one of the outbuildings, returned with Bud Hemmingway. Then, nerved to the ordeal by Bud's businesslike methods, and the awful profanity that gushed from his clenched teeth, she helped them carry Taylor into the house.

They took Taylor into his own room and laid him on the bed; a long, limp figure, pitifully shattered, lying very white and still.

The girl stayed in the room while Mrs. Mullarky and Bud ran hither and thither getting water, cloths, stimulants, and other indispensable articles. And during one of their absences the girl knelt beside the bed, and resting her head close to Taylor's—with her hands stroking his blackened face—she whispered:

“O Lord, save him—save him for—for me!”

CHAPTER XXII

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

BEFORE night the Arrow outfit, led by Bothwell, the range boss, came into the ranchhouse. For the news had reached them—after the manner in which all news travels in the cow-country—by word of mouth—and they had come in—all those who could be spared—to determine the truth of the rumor.

There were fifteen of them, rugged, capable-looking fellows; and despite the doctor's objections, they filed singly, though noiselessly, into Taylor's room and silently looked down upon their "boss." Marion, watching them from a corner of the room, noted their quick gulps of pity, their grim faces, the savage gleams that came into their eyes, and she knew they were thinking of vengeance upon the men who had wrought the injury to their employer.

Bothwell—big, grim, and deliberate of manner—said nothing as he looked down into his chief's face. But later, outside the house, listening to Bud Hemmingway's recital of how Taylor had been brought to the ranchhouse, Bothwell said shortly:

"I'm takin' a look!"

Shortly afterward, followed by every man of the outfit who had ridden in with him, Bothwell crossed the big basin and sent his horse up the long slope to the big house.

Outside they came upon the bodies of the two men with whom Taylor had fought. And inside the house they saw the other huddled on the floor near a door in the big front room. Silently the men filed through the house, looking into all the rooms, and noting the wreck and ruin that had been wrought. They saw the broken glass of the little window through which one of Carrington's men had fired the first shot; they noted the hole in the ceiling—caused by a bullet from Taylor's pistol; and they saw another hole in the wall near the door beside which Taylor had been standing just before he had swung the door open.

"Three of them—an' Carrington—accordin' to what Bud says," said Bothwell. "That's four." He smiled bitterly. "They got him all right—almost, I reckon. But from the looks of things they must have had a roarin' picnic doin' it!"

Not disturbing anything, the entire outfit mounted and rode swiftly down the Dawes trail, their hearts swelling with sympathy for Taylor and passionate hatred for Carrington, "itching for a clean-up," as one sullen-looking member of the outfit described his feelings.

But there was no "clean-up." When they reached Dawes they found the town quiet—and men who saw them gave them plenty of room and forebore to argue with

them. For it was known that they were reckless, hardy spirits when the mood came upon them, and that they worshiped Taylor.

And so they entered Dawes, and Dawes treated them with respect. Passing the city hall, they noticed some men grouped in front of the building, and they halted, Bothwell dismounting and entering.

"What's the gang collectin' for?" he asked a man—whom he knew for Danforth. There was a belligerent thrust to Bothwell's chin, and a glare in his eyes that, Danforth felt, must be met with diplomacy.

"There's been trouble at the Huggins house, and I'm sending these men to investigate."

"Give them diggin' tools," said Bothwell grimly. "An' remember this—if there's any more herd-ridin' of our boss the Arrow outfit is startin' a private graveyard!" He pinned the mayor with a cold glare: "Where's Carrington?"

"In his rooms—under a doctor's care. He's hit—bad. A bullet in his side."

"Ought to be in his gizzard!" growled Bothwell. He went out, mounted, and led his men away. They were reluctant to leave town, but Bothwell was insistent. "They ain't no fight in that bunch of plug-uglies!" he scoffed. "We'll go back an' 'tend to business, an' pull for the boss to get well!"

And so they returned to the Arrow, to find that the

Dawes doctor was still with Taylor. The doctor sent out word to them that there was a slight chance for his patient, and satisfied that they had done all they could, they rode away, to attend to "business."

For the first time in her life Marion Harlan was witnessing the fight of a strong man to live despite grievous wounds that, she was certain, would have instantly killed most men. But Taylor fought his fight unconsciously, for he was still in that deep coma that had descended upon him when he had gently slipped to the ground beside the house, still fighting, still scorning the efforts of his enemies to finish him.

And during the first night's fever he still fought; the powerful sedatives administered by the doctor had little effect. In his delirium he muttered such terms and phrases as these: "Run, damn you—run! I ain't in any hurry, and I'll get you!" And—"I'll certainly smash you some!" And—"A 'thing,' eh—I'll show you! She's mine, you miserable whelp!"

Whether these were thoughts, or whether they were memories of past utterances, made vivid and brought into the present by the fever, the girl did not know. She sat beside his bed all night, with the doctor near her, waiting and watching and listening.

And she heard more: "That's Larry's girl, and it's up to me to protect her." And—"I knew she'd look like

that." Also—"They're both tryin' to send her to hell! But I'll fool them!" At these times there was ineffable tenderness in his voice. But at times he broke out in terrible wrath. "Ambush me, eh? Ha, ha! That was right clever of you, Spotted Tail—we didn't make a good target, did we? Only for your sense we'd have—" He ceased, to begin anew: "I've got *you*—damn you!" And then he would try to sit erect, swinging his arms as though he were trying to hit someone.

But toward morning he fell into a fitful sleep—the sleep of exhaustion; and when the dawn came, Mrs. Mul-larky ordered the girl, pale and wan from her night's vigilance and service, to "go to bed."

For three days it was the same. And for three days the doctor stayed at the side of the patient, only sleeping when Miss Harlan watched over Taylor.

And during the three days' vigil, Taylor's delirium lasted. The girl learned more of his character during those three days of constant watchfulness than she would have learned in as many years otherwise. That he was honorable and courageous, she knew; but that he was so sincerely apprehensive over her welfare she had never suspected. For she learned through his ravings that he had fought Carrington and the three men for her; that he had deliberately sought Carrington to punish him for the attack on her, and that he had not considered his own danger at all.

'And at the beginning of the fourth day, when he opened his eyes and stared wonderingly about the room, his gaze at first resting upon the doctor, and then traveling to the girl's face, and remaining there for a long time, while a faint smile wreathed his lips, the girl's heart beat high with delight.

"Well, I'm still a going it," he said weakly.

"I remember," he went on, musingly. "When they was handing it to me, I was thinking that I was in pretty bad shape. And then they must have handed it to me some more, for I quit thinking at all. I'm going to pull through—ain't I?"

"You are!" declared the doctor. "That is," he amended, "if you keep your trap shut and do a lot of sleeping."

"For which I'm going to have a lot of time," smiled Taylor. "I'm going to sleep, for I feel mighty like sleeping. But before I do any sleeping, there's a thing I want to know. Did Carrington's men—the last two—get away, or did I——"

"You did," grinned the doctor. "Bothwell rode over there to find out—and Mullarky saw them. Mullarky brought you back—and got me."

"Carrington?" inquired the patient.

"Mullarky saw him. He says he never saw a man so beat up in his life. Besides, you shot him, too—in the side. Not dangerous, but a heap painful."

Taylor smiled and looked at Miss Harlan. "I knew you were here," he said; "I've felt you near me. It was mighty comforting, and I want to thank you for it. There were times when I must have shot off my mouth a heap. If I said anything I shouldn't have said, I'm a whole lot sorry. And I'm asking your pardon."

"You didn't," she said, her eyes eloquent with joy over the improvement in him.

"Well, then, I'm going to sleep." He raised his right hand—his good one—and waved it gayly at them—and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XXIII

A WORLD-OLD LONGING

LOOKING back upon the long period of Taylor's convalescence, Marion Harlan could easily understand why she had surrendered to the patient.

In the first place, she had liked Taylor from the very beginning—even when she had affected to ridicule him on the train coming toward Dawes. She had known all along that she had liked him, and on that morning when she had visited the Arrow to ask about her father Taylor had woven a magnetic spell about her.

That meeting and the succeeding ones had merely strengthened her liking for him. But the inevitable intimacy between nurse and patient during several long weeks of convalescence had wrought havoc with her heart.

Taylor's unfailing patience and good humor had been another factor in bringing about her surrender. It was hard for her to believe that he had fought a desperate battle which had resulted in the death of three men and the wounding of Carrington and himself; for there were no savage impulses or passions gleaming in the eyes that followed her every movement while she had been busy in the sickroom for some weeks. Nor could she see any

lingering threat in them, promising more violence upon his recovery. He seemed to have forgotten that there had been a fight, and during the weeks that she had been close to him he had not even mentioned it. He had been content, it seemed, to lounge in a chair and listen to her while she read, to watch her; and there had been times when she had seen a glow in his eyes that told her things that she longed to hear him say.

The girl's surrender had not been conveyed to Taylor in words, though she was certain he knew of it; for the signs of it must have been visible, since she could feel the blushes in her cheeks at times when a word or a look passing between them was eloquent with the proof of her aroused emotions.

It was on a morning about six weeks following the incident of the shooting that she and Taylor had walked to the river. Upon a huge flat rock near the edge of a slight promontory they seated themselves, Taylor turned slightly, so that she had only a profile view of him.

Taylor's thoughts were grave. For from where he and the girl sat — far beyond the vast expanse of green-brown grass that carpeted the big level — he could see a huge cleft in some mountains. And the sight of that cleft sent Taylor's thoughts leaping back to the days he and Larry Harlan had spent in these mountains, searching for — and finding — that gold for which they had come. And inevitably as the contemplation of the mountains brought

him recollections of Larry Harlan he was reminded of his obligation to his old-time partner. And the difficulties of discharging that obligation were increasing, it seemed.

At least, Taylor's duty was not quite clear to him. For while Parsons still retained a place in the girl's affections he could not turn over to her Larry's share of the money he had received from the sale of the mine.

And Parsons did retain the girl's affections — likewise her confidence and trust. A man must be blind who could not see that. For the girl looked after him as any dutiful girl might care for a father she loved. Her attitude toward the man puzzled Taylor, for, he assured himself, if she would but merely study the man's face perfunctorily she could not have failed to see the signs of deceit and hypocrisy in it. All of which convinced Taylor of the truth of the old adage: "Love is blind."

One other influence which dissuaded Taylor from an impulse to turn over Larry's money to the girl was his determination to win her on his own merits. That might have seemed selfishness on his part, but now that the girl was at the Arrow he could see that she was well supplied with everything she needed. Her legacy would not buy her more than he would give her gratuitously. And he did not want her to think for a single moment he was trying to buy her love. That, to his mind was gross commercialism.

Marion was not looking at the mountains; she was

watching Taylor's profile—and blushing over thoughts that came to her.

For she wished that she might have met him under different conditions—upon a basis of equality. And that was not the basis upon which they stood now. She had come to the Arrow because she had no other place to go, vindicating her action upon Taylor's declaration that he had been her father's friend.

That had been a tangible premise, and was sufficient to satisfy, or to dull, any surface scruples *he* might have had regarding the propriety of the action. But her own moral sense struck deeper than that. She felt she had no right to be here; that Taylor had made the offer of a partnership out of charity. And so long as she stayed here, dependent upon him for food and shelter, she could not permit him to speak a word of love to her—much as she wanted him to speak it. Such was the puritanical principle driven deep into the moral fabric of her character by a mother who had set her a bad example.

This man had fought for her; he had risked his life to punish a man who had wronged her in thought, only; and she knew he loved her. And yet, seated so near him, she could not put out the hand that longed to touch him.

However, her thoughts were not tragic—far from it! Youth is hopeful because it has so long to wait. And there was in *her* heart at this moment a presentiment that

time would sever the bonds of propriety that held her. And the instincts of her sex — though never having been tested in the arts of coquetry — told her how to keep his heart warm toward her until that day, having achieved her independence, she could meet him on a basis of equality.

"Mr. Squint," she suddenly demanded; "what are you thinking about?"

He turned and looked full at her, his eyes glowing with a grave humor.

"I'd tell you if I thought you'd listen to me," he returned, significantly. "But it seems that every time I get on that subject you poke fun at me. Is there *anything* I can do to show you that I love you — that I want you more than any man ever wanted a woman?"

"Yes — there is." Her smile was tantalizing.

"Name it!" he demanded, eagerly.

"Stop being tragic. I don't like you when you are tragic — or when you are talking nonsense about love. I have heard so much of it!"

"From me, I suppose?" he said, gloomily.

He had turned his head and she shot a quick, eloquent glance at him. "From you — and several others," she said, deliberately.

There was a resentful, hurt look in his eyes when he turned and looked at her. "Just how many?" he demanded, somewhat gruffly.

"Jealous!" she said, shaking her finger at him. "Do you want a bill of particulars? Because if you do," she added, looking demurely downward, "I should have to take several days to think it over. You see, a woman can't catalogue everything men say to her — for they say so many silly things!"

"Love isn't silly," he declared. He looked rather fiercely at her. "What kind of a man do you like best?" he demanded.

She blushed. "I like a big man — about as big as you," she said. "A man with fierce eyes that glower at a woman when she talks to him of love — she insisting that she hasn't quite fallen in love — with *him*. I like a man who is jealous of the reputation of the woman he *professes* to love; a man who is jealous of other men; a man who isn't so very good-looking, but who is a handsome man for all that — because he is so very manly; a man who will fight and risk his life for me."

"Could you name such a man?" he said. There was a scornful gleam in his eyes.

"I am looking at him this minute!" she said.

Grinning, for he knew all along that she had been talking of him, he wheeled quickly and tried to catch her in his arms. But she slipped off the rock and was around on the other side of it, keeping it between them while he tried to catch her. Instinctively he realized that the chase was hopeless, but he persisted.

"I'll never speak to you again if you catch me!" she warned, her eyes flashing.

"But you told me——"

"That I liked you," she interrupted. "And liking a man isn't——"

And then she paused and looked down, blushing, while Taylor, in the act of vaulting over the rock, collapsed and sat on it instead, red of face and embarrassed.

For within a dozen paces of them, and looking rather embarrassed and self-conscious, himself, though with a twinkle in his eyes that made Taylor's cheeks turn redder—was Bud Hemmingway.

"I'm beggin' your pardon," said the puncher; "but I've come to tell you that Neil Norton is here—again. He's been settin' on the porch for an hour or two—he says. But I think he's stretching it. Anyway, he's tired of waitin' for you—he says—an' he's been wonderin' if you was goin' to set on that boulder all day!"

Taylor slipped off the rock and started toward Bud, feigning resentment.

Bud, his face agitated by a broad grin, deliberately winked at Miss Harlan—though he spoke to Taylor.

"I'd be a little careful about how I went to jumpin' off boulders—you might bust your ankle again!"

And then Taylor grinned at Miss Harlan—who pretended a severity she did not feel; while Bud, cackling mirthfully, went toward the ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DEATH WARRANT

CARRINGTON was not a coward; he was not even a cautious man. And the bitter malice that filled his heart, together with riotous impulses that seethed in his brain prompted him to go straight to the Arrow, wreak vengeance upon Taylor and drag Marion Harlan back to the big house he had bought for her.

But a certain memory of Taylor's face when the latter had been pursuing him through the big house; a knowledge of Taylor's ability to inflict punishment, together with a divination that Taylor would not hesitate to kill him should there arise the slightest opportunity—all these considerations served to deter Carrington from undertaking any rash action.

Taylor's opposition to his desires enraged Carrington. He had met and conquered many men—and he had coolly and deliberately robbed many others, himself standing secure and immune behind legal barriers. And he had seen his victims writhe and squirm and struggle in the meshes he had prepared for them. He had heard them rave and wail and threaten; but not one of them had attempted to inflict physical punishment upon him.

Taylor, however, was of the fighting type. On two occasions, now, Carrington had been given convincing proof of the man's ability. And he had seen in Taylor's eyes on the latest occasion the implacable gleam of iron resolution and—when Taylor had gone down, fighting to the last, in the sanguinary battle at the big house, he had not failed to note the indomitability of the man—the tenacious and dogged spirit that knows no defeat—a spirit that would not be denied.

And so, though Carrington's desires would have led him to recklessly carry the fight to the Arrow, certain dragging qualms of reluctance dissuaded him from another meeting with Taylor on equal terms.

And yet the malevolent passions that gripped the big man would not tolerate the thought of opposition. Taylor was the only man who stood between him and his desires, and Taylor must be removed.

During the days of Carrington's confinement to his rooms above the Castle—awaiting the slow healing of the wound Taylor had inflicted upon him, and the many bruises that marred his face—mementoes of the terrible punishment Taylor had inflicted upon him—the big man nursed his venomous thoughts and laid plans for revenge upon his enemy.

As soon as he was able to appear in Dawes—to undergo without humiliation the inspection of his face by the citizens of the town—for news of his punishment

had been whispered broadcast—he boarded a westbound train.

He got off at Nogel, a little mining town sitting at the base of some foothills in the Sangre de Christo Range, some miles from Dawes.

He spent three days in Nogel, interrogating the resident manager of the “Larry’s Luck” mine, talking with miners and storekeepers and quizzing men in saloons—and at the beginning of the fourth day he returned to Dawes.

At about the time Miss Harlan and Taylor were sitting on the rock on the bank of the river near the Arrow, Carrington was in the courthouse at Dawes, leaning over Judge Littlefield’s desk. A tall, sleek-looking man of middle age, with a cold, steady eye and a smooth smile, stood near Carrington. The man was neatly attired, and looked like a prosperous mine-owner or operator.

But had the judge looked sharply at his hands when he gripped the one that was held out to him when Carrington introduced the man; or had he been a physiognomist of average ability, he could not have failed to note the smooth softness of the man’s hands and the gleam of guile and cunning swimming deep in his eyes.

But the judge noted none of those things. He had caught the man’s name—Mint Morton—and instantly afterward all his senses became centered upon what the man was saying.

For the man spoke of conscience—and the judge had one of his own—a guilty one. So he listened attentively while the man talked.

The thing had been bothering the man for some months—or from the time it happened, he said. And he had come to make a confession.

He was a miner, having a claim near Nogel. He knew Quinton Taylor, and he had known Larry Harlan. One morning after leaving his mine on a trip to Nogel for supplies, he had passed close to the “Larry’s Luck” mine. Being on good terms with the partners, he had thought of visiting them. Approaching the mine on foot—having left his horse at a little distance—he heard Taylor and Harlan quarreling. He had no opportunity to interfere, for just as he came upon the men he saw Taylor knock Harlan down with a blow of his fist. And while Harlan lay unconscious on the ground Taylor had struck him on the head with a rock.

Morton had not revealed himself, then, fearing Taylor would attack him. He had concealed himself, and had seen Taylor, apparently remorseful, trying to revive Harlan. These efforts proving futile, Taylor had rigged up a drag, placed Harlan on it, and had taken him to Nogel. But Harlan died on the way.

To Littlefield’s inquiry as to why Morton had not reported the murder instantly, the man replied that, being a friend to Taylor, he had been reluctant to expose him.

After the man concluded his story the judge and Carrington exchanged glances. There was a vindictively triumphant gleam in Littlefield's eyes, for he still remembered the humiliation he had endured at Taylor's hands.

He took Morton's deposition, told him he would send for him, later; and dismissed him. Carrington, appearing to be much astonished over the man's confession, accompanied him to the station, where he watched him board the train that would take him back to Nogel.

And on the platform of one of the coaches, Carrington, grinning wickedly, gave the man a number of yellow-backed treasury notes.

"You think I won't have to come back—to testify against him?" asked the man, smiling coldly.

"Certainly not!" declared Carrington. "You've signed his death warrant this time!"

Carrington watched the train glide westward, and then returned to the courthouse. He found the judge sitting at his desk, gazing meditatively at the floor. For there had been something insincere in Morton's manner—his story of the murder had not been quite convincing—and in spite of his resentment against Taylor the judge did not desire to add anything to the burden already carried by his conscience.

Carrington grinned maliciously as he halted at Littlefield's side and laid a hand on the other's arm.

"We've got him, Littlefield!" he said. "Get busy.

Issue a warrant for his arrest. I'll have Danforth send you some men to serve as deputies—twenty of them, if you think it necessary!”

The judge cleared his throat and looked with shifting eyes at the other.

“Look here, Carrington,” he said, “I—I have some doubts about the sincerity of that man Morton. I'd like to postpone action in this case until I can make an investigation. It seems to me that—that Taylor, for all his—er—seeming viciousness, is not the kind of man to kill his partner. I'd like to delay just a little, to——”

“And let Taylor get wind of the thing—and escape. Not by a damned sight! One man's word is as good as another's in this country; and it's your duty as a judge of the court, here, to act upon any complaint. You issue the warrant. I'll get Keats to serve it. He'll bring Taylor here, and you can legally examine him. That's merely justice!”

Half an hour later, Carrington was handing the warrant to a big, rough-looking man with an habitual and cruel droop to the corners of his mouth.

“You'd better take some men with you, Keats,” suggested Carrington. “He'll fight, most likely,” he grinned, evilly. “Understand,” he added; “if you should have to kill Taylor bringing him in, there would be no inquiry made. And——” he looked at Keats and grinned, slowly and deliberately closing an eye.

CHAPTER XXV

KEATS LOOKS FOR "SQUINT"

NEIL NORTON had been attending to Taylor's affairs in Dawes during the latter's illness, and he had ridden to the Arrow this morning to discuss with Taylor a letter he had received—for Taylor—from a Denver cattle buyer. The inquiry was for Herefords of certain markings and quality, and Norton could give the buyer no information. So Norton had come to Taylor for the information.

"The herd is grazing in the Kelso Basin," Taylor told Norton. Norton knew the Kelso Basin was at least fifteen miles distant from the Arrow ranchhouse—a deep, wide valley directly west, watered by the same river that flowed near the Arrow ranchhouse.

"I can't say, offhand, whether we've got what your Denver man wants." He grinned at Norton, adding: "But it's a fine morning for a ride, and I haven't done much riding lately. I'll go and take a look."

"I'll be looking, too," declared Norton. "The *Eagle* forms are ready for the press, and there isn't much to do."

Later, Taylor, mounted on Spotted Tail, and Norton on a big, rangy sorrel, the two men rode away. Taylor

stopped at the horse corral gate long enough to tell Bud Hemmingway, who was replacing a bar, that he and Norton were riding to the Kelso Basin.

And there was one other to whom he had spoken—when he had gone into the house to buckle on his cartridge-belt and pistols, just before he went out to saddle Spotted Tail. It was the girl who had tantalized him while they had been sitting on the rock. She had not spoken frivolously to him inside the house; instead, she had gravely warned him to be "careful;" that his wounds might bother him on a long ride—and that she didn't want him to suffer a relapse. And she watched him as he and Norton rode away, following the dust-cloud that enveloped them until it vanished into the mists of distance. Then she turned from the door with a sigh, thinking of the fate that had made her dependent upon the charity of the man she loved.

To Bud Hemmingway, working at the corral gate about an hour following the departure of Taylor and Norton, there came an insistent demand to look toward Dawes. It was merely one of those absurd impulses founded upon a whim provoked by self-manufactured presentiment—but Bud looked. What he saw caused him to stand erect and stare hard at the trail between Mullarky's cabin and the Arrow—for about two miles out came a dozen or more riders, their horses traveling fast.

For several seconds Bud watched intently, straining his

eyes in an effort to distinguish something about the men that would make their identity clear. And then he dropped the hammer he had been working with and ran to the bunkhouse, where he put on his cartridge-belt and pistol.

Returning to the bunkhouse door, he stood in it for a time, watching the approaching men. Then he scowled, muttering:

"It's that damned Keats an' some of his bunch! What in hell are they wantin' at the Arrow?"

Bud was standing near the edge of the front gallery when Keats and his men rode up. There were fourteen of the men, and, like their leader, they were ill-visaged, bepistoled.

Marion Harlan had heard the noise of their approach, and she had come to the front door. She stood in the opening, her gaze fixed inquiringly upon the riders, though chiefly upon Keats, whose manner proclaimed him the leader. He looked at Bud.

"Hello, Hemmingway!" he greeted, gruffly. "I take it the outfit ain't in?"

"Workin', Kelso," returned Bud. Bud's gaze at Keats was belligerent; he resented the presence of Keats and the men at the Arrow, for he had never liked Keats, and he knew the relations between the visitor and Taylor were strained almost to the point of open antagonism.

"What's eatin' you guys?" demanded Bud.

"Plenty!" stated Keats importantly. He turned to the men.

"Scatter!" he commanded; "an' rustle him up, if he's anywhere around! Hey!" he shouted at a slender, rat-faced individual. "You an' Darbey search the house! Two more of you take a look at the bunkhouse—and the rest of you nose around the other buildin's. Keep your eyes peeled, an' if he goes to gettin' fresh, plug him plenty!"

"Why, what is wrong?" demanded Marion. Her face was pale with indignation, for she resented the authoritative tone used by Keats as much as she resented the thought of the two men entering the house unbidden.

Keats's face flamed with sudden passion. With a snap of his wrist he drew his gun and trained its muzzle on Bud.

"Wrong enough!" he snapped. He was looking at Bud while answering Miss Harlan's question. "I'm after Squint Taylor, an' I'm goin' to get him—that's all! An' if you folks go to interferin' it'll be the worse for you!"

Marion stiffened and braced herself in the doorway, her eyes wide with dread and her lips parted to ask the question that Bud now spoke, his voice drawling slightly with sarcasm.

"Taylor, eh?" he said. "What you wantin' with Taylor?"

"I'm wantin' him for murderin' Larry Harlan!" snapped Keats.

Bud gulped, drew a deep breath and went pale. He looked at Marion, and saw that the girl was terribly moved by Keats's words. But neither the girl nor Bud spoke while Keats dismounted, crossed the porch, and stopped in front of the door, which was barred by the girl's body.

"Get out of the way—I'm goin' in!" ordered Keats.

The girl moved aside to let him pass, and as he crossed the threshold she asked, weakly:

"How do you—how do they know Mr. Taylor killed Larry Harlan?"

Keats turned on her, grinning mirthlessly.

"How do we know anything?" he jeered. "Evidence—that's what—an' plenty of it!"

Keats vanished inside, and Bud, his eyes snapping with the alert glances he threw around him, slowly backed away from the porch toward the stable. As he turned, after backing several feet, he saw Marion walk slowly to a rocker that stood on the porch, drop weakly into it and cover her face with her hands.

Gaining the stable, Bud worked fast; throwing a saddle and bridle upon King, the speediest horse in the Arrow outfit, excepting Spotted Tail.

With movements that he tried hard to make casual, but with an impatience that made his heart pound heav-

ily, he got King out and led him to the rear of the stable.

Some of Keats's men were running from one building to another; but he was not Taylor, and they seemed to pay no attention to him, beyond giving him sharp glances.

Passing behind the blacksmith-shop, Bud heard a voice saying:

"Dead or alive, Keats says; an' they'd admire to have him dead. I heard Carrington tellin' Keats!"

As the sound of the voice died away, Bud touched King's flank with the spurs. The big horse, after a day in the stable, was impatient and eager for a run, and he swept past the scattered buildings of the ranch with long, swift leaps that took him out upon the plains before Keats could complete his search of the first floor of the house.

The two men who had searched the upper floor came downstairs, to meet Keats in the front room. They grimly shook their heads at Keats, and at his orders went outside to search with the other men.

Keats stepped to the door, saw Marion sitting limply in the rocking-chair, her shoulders convulsed with sobs, and crossed to her, shaking her with a brutal arm.

"Where's that guy I left standin' there? Where's he — Hemmingway?"

"I don't know," said the girl dully.

Keats cursed and ran to the edge of the porch. With

his gaze sweeping the buildings, the pasture, the corrals, and the wide stretch of plain westward, he stiffened, calling angrily to his men:

“There he goes—damn him! It’s that sneakin’ Bud Hemmingway, an’ he’s gone to tell Taylor we’re after him! He knows where Taylor is! Get your hosses!”

Forced to her feet by the intense activity that followed Keats’s loudly bellowed orders, the girl crossed the porch, and from a point near the end railing watched Keats and his men clamber into their saddles and race after Bud. For a long time she watched them—a tiny blot gliding over the plains, followed by a larger blot—and then she walked slowly to the rocking-chair, looked down at it as though its spaciousness invited her; then she turned from it, entered the house, and going to her room—where Martha was sleeping—began feverishly throwing her few belongings into the small handbag she had brought with her from the big house.

CHAPTER XXVI

KEATS FINDS "SQUINT"

LOOKING back after he had been riding for some minutes, Bud saw a dozen or more horses break from the group of Arrow buildings and come racing toward him, spreading out fanwise.

"They've seen me!" breathed Bud, and he leaned over King's shoulders and spoke to him. The animal responded with a burst of speed that brought a smile to Bud's face. For the puncher knew that Taylor and Norton couldn't have traveled more than a few miles in the short time that had passed since their departure; and he knew also that in a short run—of a dozen miles or so—there wasn't a horse in the Dawes section that could catch King, barring, of course, Spotted Tail, the real king of range horses.

And so Bud bent eagerly to his work, not riding erect in the saddle as is the fashion of the experienced cow-puncher in an unfamiliar country, where pitfalls, breaks, draws, hidden gullies, and weed-grown barrancas provide hazards that might bring disaster. Bud knew this section of the country as well as he knew the interior of the bunkhouse, and with his knowledge came a confidence

that nothing would happen to him or King, except possibly a slip into a gopher hole.

And Bud kept scanning the country far enough ahead to keep King from running into a gopher town. He swung the animal wide in passing them—for he knew it was the habit of these denizens of the plains to extend their habitat—some venturesome and independent spirits straying far from the huddle and congestion of the multitude.

Bud looked back many times during the first two miles, and he saw that Keats and his men were losing ground; their horses could not keep the pace set by the big bay flier under Bud.

And King was not going as he could go when the necessity arrived. This ride was a frolic for the big bay, and yet Bud knew he must not force him, that he must conserve his wind, for if Taylor and Norton had yielded to a whim to hurry, even King would need all his speed and endurance to hang on. For the sorrel that had accompanied Spotted Tail was not so greatly inferior to King that the latter could take liberties with him.

Bud gloated as he looked back after he had covered another mile. Keats and his men were still losing ground, though they were not so very far back, either—Bud could almost see the faces of the men. But that, Bud knew, was due to the marvelous clarity of the atmosphere.

When the sides of the big hills surrounding the level

began to sweep inward rapidly, Bud knew that the grass level was coming to an end, and that presently he would strike a long stretch of broken country. Beyond that was a big valley, rich and fertile, in which, according to report, the Arrow herd should be grazing, guarded by the men of the outfit, under Bothwell. But Kelso Basin was still nine or ten miles distant, and Bud did not yet dare to let the big bay horse run his best.

Still, when they flashed by a huge promontory that stood sentinel-like above the waters of the river — a spot well remembered by Bud, because many times while on day duty he had lain prone on its top smoking and dreaming — King was running as lightly as a leaf before the hurricane.

King had entered the section of broken country, with its beds of rock and lava, and huge boulders strewn here and there, relics of gigantic upheavals when the earth was young; and Bud was skilfully directing King to the stretches of smooth level that he found here and there, when far ahead he saw Taylor and Norton.

In ten minutes he was within hailing distance, and he grinned widely when, hearing him, they pulled their horses to a halt and, wheeling, faced him.

For Bud saw that they had reached a spot which would make an admirable defensive position, should Taylor decide to resist Keats. The hills, in their gradual inward sweep, were close together, so that their crests seemed to

nod to one another. And a little farther down, Bud knew, they formed a gorge, which still farther on merged into a cañon. It was an ideal position for a stand—if Taylor would stand and not run for it; and he rather thought Taylor would not run.

Taylor had ridden toward Bud, and was a hundred feet in advance of Norton when Bud pulled King to a halt, shouting:

“Keats and a dozen men are right behind me—a mile; mebbe two! He’s got a warrant for you, chargin’ you with murderin’ Larry Harlan! I heard one of his scum sayin’ it was to be a clean-up!”

Taylor laughed; he did not seem to be at all interested in Keats or his men, who at that instant were riding at a pace that was likely to kill their horses, should they be forced to maintain it.

“Who accused me of murdering Harlan?”

“Keats didn’t say. But I heard a guy sayin’ that Car-rington was wantin’ Keats to take you dead!”

The cold gleam in Taylor’s eyes and the slight, stiff grin that wreathed his lips, indicated that he had determined that Keats would have to kill him before taking him.

“A dozen of them, eh?” he said, looking from Bud to Norton deliberately. “Well, that’s a bunch for three men to fight, but it isn’t enough to run from. We’ll stay here and have it out with them. That is,” he added with

a quick, quizzical look at the two men, "if one of you is determined to stay."

"One of us?" flared Bud. He gazed hard at Norton, with suspicion and belligerence in his glance. Norton flushed at the look. "I reckon we'll both be in at the finish," added Bud.

"Only one," declared Taylor. "We might hold a dozen men off here for a good many hours. But if they were wise and patient they'd get us. One man will light out for Kelso Basin to get the outfit. Settle it between you, but be quick about it!"

Taylor swung down from his horse, led the animal out of sight behind a jutting crag into a sort of pocket in the side of the gorge, where there would be no danger of the magnificent beast being struck by a bullet. Taylor pulled his rifle from its saddle-sheath, examined the mechanism, looked at his pistols, and then returned to where Bud Hemmingway and Neil Norton sat on their horses.

Bud's face was flushed and Norton was grinning. And at just the instant Taylor came in sight of them Norton was saying:

"Well, if you insist, I suppose I shall have to go to Kelso. There isn't time to argue."

Norton wheeled his horse, and, with a quick grin at Taylor, sent the animal clattering down the gorge.

Bud's grin at Taylor was pregnant with guilt.

"Norton didn't want me to stay. There's lots of stubborn cusses in the world—now, ain't they?"

Taylor's answering smile showed that he understood.

"Get King back here with Spotted Tail, Bud!" he directed. "And take that pile of rocks for cover. They're coming!"

By the time Bud did as he had been bidden, and was crouching behind a huge mound of broken rock on the north side of the gorge, Taylor on the southern side, with a twenty-foot passage on the comparatively level floor of the gorge between them, and an uninterrupted sweep of narrow level in front of them, except for here and there a jutting rock or a boulder, they saw Keats and his men just entering the stretch of broken country.

The horses of the pursuing outfit were doing their best. They came on over the stretch of treacherous trail, laboring, pounding and clattering; singly sometimes, two and three abreast where there was room, keeping well together, their riders urging them with quirt and spur. For far back on the trail they had lost sight of Bud, though Keats had remembered that Bud had said Taylor had gone to Kelso Basin, and therefore Keats knew he was on the right trail.

However, he did not want to let Bud get to Kelso before him to warn the Arrow outfit; for that would mean a desperate battle with a force equal in numbers to his own. Keats fought best when the advantages were with him,

and he knew his men were similarly constituted. And so he was riding as hard as he dared, hoping that something would happen to Bud's horse—that the animal might become winded or fall. A man could not tell what *might* happen in a pursuit of this character.

But the thing that *did* happen had not figured in Keats's lurid conjectures at all. That was why, when he heard Taylor's quick challenge, he pulled his horse up sharply, so that the animal slipped several feet and came to a halt sidewise.

Keats's unexpected halt brought confusion to his followers. A dozen of them, crowding Keats hard, and not noticing their leader's halt in time, rode straight against him, their horses jamming the narrow gorge, kicking, snorting and squealing in a disordered and uncontrollable mass.

When the tangle had been magically undone—the magic being Taylor's voice again, burdened with sarcasm bearing upon their excitement—Keats found himself nearest the nest of rocks from behind which Taylor's voice seemed to come.

The jutting crag behind which Taylor had concealed his horse, and where Bud had led King, completely obstructed Keats's view of the gorge behind the crag, toward Kelso Basin, and Keats did not know but that the entire Arrow outfit was concealed behind the rocks and boulders that littered the level in the vicinity.

And so he sat motionless, slowly and respectfully raising his hands. Noting his action, his men did likewise.

"That's polite," came Taylor's voice coldly. "Hemingway says you're looking for me. What for?"

"I've got a warrant for you, chargin' you with murderin' Larry Harlan."

"Who accused me?"

"Mint Morton, of Nogel."

There was a long silence. Behind the clump of rock Taylor smiled mirthlessly at Bud, who was watching him. For Taylor knew Mint Morton, of Nogel, as a gambler, unscrupulous and dishonest. He had earned Morton's hatred when one night in a Nogel saloon he had caught Morton cheating and had forced him to disgorge his winnings. His victim had been a miner on his way East with the earnings of five years in his pockets. Taylor had not been able to endure the spectacle of abject despair that had followed the man's loss of all his money.

Taylor did not know that Carrington had hunted Morton up, paying him well to bring the murder charge, but Taylor did know that he was innocent of murder; and by linking Morton with Carrington he could readily understand why Keats wanted him. He broke the silence with a short:

"Who issued the warrant?"

"Judge Littlefield."

"Well," said Taylor, "you can take it right back to

him and tell him to let Carrington serve it. For," he added, a note of grim humor creeping into his voice, "I'm a heap particular about such things, Keats. I couldn't let a sneak like you take me in. And I don't like the looks of that dirty-looking outfit with you. And so I'm telling you a few things. I'm giving you one minute to hit the breeze out of this section. If you're here when that time is up, I down *you*, Keats! Slope!"

Keats flashed one glance around at his men. Some of them already had their horses in motion; others were nervously fingering their bridle-reins. Keats sneered at the rock nest ahead of him.

The intense silence which followed Taylor's warning lasted about ten seconds. Then Keats's face paled; he wheeled his horse and sent it scampering over the back trail, his men following, crowding him hard.

CHAPTER XXVII

BESIEGED

HEMMINGWAY tentatively suggested that a ride through the gorge toward the Kelso Basin might simplify matters for himself and Taylor; it might, he said, even seem to make the defending of their position unnecessary. But his suggestions met with no enthusiasm from Taylor, who lounged among the rocks of his place of concealment calmly smoking.

Taylor gave some reasons for his disinclination to adopt Hemmingway's suggestions.

"Norton will be back in an hour, with Bothwell and the outfit." And now he grinned as he looked at Bud. "Miss Harlan told me to be careful about my scratches. I take it she don't want no more sieges with a sick man. And I'm taking her advice. If I'd go to riding my horse like blazes, maybe I *would* get sick again. And she wouldn't take care of me anymore. And I'd hate like blazes to run from Keats and his bunch of plug-uglies!"

So Hemmingway said no more on that subject.

They smoked and talked and watched the trail for signs of Keats and his men; while the sun, which had been behind the towering hills surrounding the gorge, trav-

eled slowly above them, finally blazing down from a point directly overhead.

It became hot in the gorge; the air was stifling and the heat uncomfortable. Taylor did not seem to mind it, but Bud, with a vigorous appetite, and longings that ran to flapjacks and sirup, grew impatient.

"If a man could eat now," he remarked once, while the sun was directly overhead, "why, it wouldn't be so bad!"

And then, after the sun's blazing rays had begun to diminish in intensity somewhat, Bud looked upward and saw that the shimmering orb had passed beyond the crest of a towering hill. He looked sharply at Taylor, who was intently watching the back trail, and said gravely:

"Norton ought to have been back with Bothwell and the bunch, now."

"He's an hour overdue," said Taylor, without looking at Bud.

"I reckon somethin's happened," growled Bud. "Somethin' always happens when a guy's holed up, like this. It wouldn't be so bad if a man could eat a little somethin'—to sort of keep him from thinkin' of it all the time. Or, mebbe, if there was a little excitement—or somethin'. A man could——"

"There'll be plenty of excitement before long," interrupted Taylor. "Keats and his gang didn't go very far. I just saw one of them sneaking along that rock-knob,

down the gorge a piece. They're going to stalk us. If you're thinking of riding to Kelso — why —" He grinned at Bud's resentful scowl.

Lying flat on his stomach, he watched the rock-knob he had mentioned.

"Slick as an Indian," he remarked once, while Bud, having ceased his discontented mutterings, kept his gaze on the rock also.

And then suddenly the eery silence of the gorge was broken by the sharp crack of Taylor's rifle, and, simultaneously, by a shriek of pain. Report and shriek reverberated with weird, echoing cadences between the hills, growing less distinct always and finally the eery silence reigned again.

"They'll know they can't get careless, now," grinned Taylor, working the ejector of his rifle.

Bud did not reply; and for another hour both men intently scanned the hills within range of their vision, straining their eyes to detect signs of movement that would warn them of the whereabouts of Keats and his men.

Anxiously Bud watched the rays of the sun creeping up a precipitous rock wall at a little distance. Slowly the streak of light narrowed, growing always less brilliant, and finally, when it vanished, Bud spoke:

"It's comin' on night, Squint. Somethin's sure happened to Norton." He wriggled impatiently, adding:

"If we're here when night comes we'll have a picnic keepin' them guys off of us."

Taylor said nothing until the gorge began to darken with the shadows of twilight. Then he looked at Bud, his face grim.

"My stubbornness," he said shortly. "I should have taken your advice about going to Kelso Basin — when we had a chance. But I felt certain that Norton would have the outfit here before this. Our chance is gone, now. There are some of Keats's men in the hills, around us. I just saw one jump behind that rim rock on the shoulder of that big hill — there." He indicated the spot. Then he again spoke to Bud.

"There's a chance yet — for you. You take Spotted Tail and make a run for the basin. I'll cover you."

"What about you?" grumbled Bud.

Taylor grinned, and Bud laughed. "You was only funnin' me, I reckon," he said, earnestly. "You knowed I wouldn't slope an' leave you to fight it out alone — now didn't you?"

"But if a man was hungry," said Taylor, "and he knew there was grub with the outfit ——"

"I ain't hungry no more," declared Bud; "I've quit thinkin' of flapjacks for more than ——"

He stiffened, and the first shadows of the night were split by a long, narrow flame-streak as his rifle crashed. And a man who had been slipping into the shelter of a

depression on the side of a hill a hundred yards distant, tumbled grotesquely out and down, and went sliding to the bottom of the gorge.

As though the report of Bud's rifle were a signal, a dozen vivid jets of fire flamed from various points in the surrounding hills, and the silence was rent by the vicious cracking of rifles and the drone and thud of bullets as they sped over the heads of the two men at the bottom of the gorge and flattened themselves against the rocks of their shelter.

That sound, too, died away. And in the heavy, portentous stillness which succeeded it, there came to the ears of the two besieged men the sounds of distant shouting, faint and far.

"It's the outfit!" said Taylor.

And Bud, rolling over and over in an excess of joy over the coming of the Arrow men, hugged an imaginary form and yelled:

"Oh, Bothwell, you old son-of-a-gun! How I love you!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FUGITIVE

ONE thought dominated Marion Harlan's brain as she packed her belongings into the little handbag in her room at the Arrow — an overpowering, monstrous, hideous conviction that she had accepted charity from the man who was accused of murdering her father! There was no room in her brain for other thoughts or emotions; she was conscious of nothing but the horror of it; of the terrible uncertainty that confronted her — of the dread that Taylor *might* be guilty! She wanted to believe in him — she *did* believe in him, she told herself as she packed the bag; she could not accept the word of Keats as final. And yet she could not stay at the Arrow another minute — she could not endure the uncertainty. She must go away somewhere — anywhere, until the charge were proved, or until she could see Taylor, to look into his eyes, there to see his guilt or innocence.

She felt that the charge could not be true; for Taylor had treated her so fairly; he had been so sympathetically friendly; he had seemed to share her grief over her father's death, and he had seemed so sincere in his declaration of his friendliness toward the man. He had

even seemed to share her grief; and in the hallowed moments during which he had stood beside her while she had looked into her father's room, he might have been secretly laughing at her!

And into her heart as she stood in the room, now, there crept a mighty shame—and the shadow of her mother's misconduct never came so close as it did now. For she, too, had violated the laws of propriety; and what she was receiving was not more than her just due. And yet, though she could blame herself for coming to the Arrow, she could not excuse Taylor's heinous conduct if he were guilty.

And then, the first fierce passion burning itself out, there followed the inevitable reaction—the numbing, staggering, sorrowing realization of loss. This in turn was succeeded by a frenzied desire to go away from the Arrow—from everybody and everything—to some place where none of them would ever see her again.

She started toward the door, and met Parsons—who was looking for her. He darted forward when he saw her, and grasped her by the shoulders.

“What has happened?” he demanded.

She told him, and the man's face whitened.

“I was asleep, and heard nothing of it,” he said. “So that man Keats said they had plenty of evidence! You are going away? I wouldn't, girl; there may have been a mistake. If I were you——”

Her glance of horror brought Parsons' protests to an end quickly. He, too, she thought, was under the spell of Taylor's magnetism. That, or every person she knew was a prey to those vicious and fawning instincts to which she had yielded—the subordination of principle to greed—of ease, or of wealth, or of place.

She shuddered with sudden repugnance.

For the first time she had a doubt of Parsons—a revelation of that character which he had always succeeded in keeping hidden from her. She drew away from him and walked to the door, telling him that *he* might stay, but that she did not intend to remain in the house another minute.

She found a horse in the stable—two, in fact—the ones Taylor had insisted belonged to her and Martha. She threw saddle and bridle on hers, and was mounting, when she saw Martha standing at the stable door, watching her.

“Yo’ uncle says you goin’ away, honey—how’s that? An’ he done say somethin’ about Mr. Squint killin’ your father. Doan’ you b’lieve no fool nonsense like that! Mr. Squint wouldn’t kill nobody’s father! That deputy man ain’t nothin’ but a damn, no-good liar!”

Martha’s vehemence was genuine, but not convincing; and the girl mounted the horse, hanging the handbag from the pommel of the saddle.

“You’s sure goin’!” screamed the negro woman, fran-

tic with a dread that she was in danger of losing the girl for whom she had formed a deep affection.

"You wait—you hear!" she demanded; "if you leave this house I's a goin', too!"

Marion waited until Martha led the other horse out, and then, with the negro woman following, she rode eastward on the Dawes trail, not once looking back.

And not a word did she say to Martha as they rode into the space that stretched to Dawes, for the girl's heart was heavy with self-accusation.

They stopped for an instant at Mullarky's cabin, and Mrs. Mullarky drew from the girl the story of the morning's happenings. And like Martha, Mrs. Mullarky had an abiding faith in Taylor's innocence. More—she scorned the charge of murder against him.

"Squint Taylor murder your father, child! Why, Squint Taylor thought more of Larry Harlan than he does of his right hand. An' you ain't goin' to run away from him—for the very good reason that I ain't goin' to let you! You're upset—that's what—an' you can't think as straight as you ought to. You come right in here an' sip a cup of tea, an' take a rest. I'll put your horses away. If you don't want to stay at the Arrow while Taylor, the judge, an' all the rest of them are pullin' the packin' out of that case, why, you can stay right here!"

Yielding to the insistent demands of the good woman, Marion meekly consented and went inside. And Mrs.

Mullarky tried to make her comfortable, and attempted to soothe her and assure her of Taylor's innocence.

But the girl was not convinced; and late in the afternoon, despite Mrs. Mullarky's protests, she again mounted her horse and, followed by Martha, set out toward Dawes, intending to take the first east-bound train out of the town, to ride as far as the meager amount of money in her purse would take her. And as she rode, the sun went down behind the big hill on whose crest sat the big house, looming down upon the level from its lofty eminence; and the twilight came, bathing the world with its somber promise of greater darkness to follow. But the darkness that was coming over the world could not be greater than that which reigned in the girl's heart.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CAPTIVE

CARRINGTON'S experiences with Taylor had not dulled the man's savage impulses, nor had they cooled his feverish desire for the possession of Marion Harlan. In his brain rioted the dark, unbridled passions of those progenitors he had claimed in his talk with Parsons on the morning he had throttled the little man in his rooms above the Castle.

For the moment he had postponed the real beginning of his campaign for the possession of Dawes, his venomous hatred for Taylor and his passion for the girl overwhelming his greed.

He had watched the departure of Keats and his men, a flush of exultation on his face, his eyes alight with fires that reflected the malignant hatred he felt. And when Keats and the others disappeared down the trail that led to the Arrow, Carrington spent some time in Dawes. Shortly after noon he rode out the river trail toward the big house with two men that he had engaged to set the interior in order.

Carrington had not seen the house since the fight with Taylor in the front room, and the wreck and ruin that

met his gaze as he stood in the door brought a sullen pout to his lips.

But he intended to exact heavy punishment for what had occurred at the big house; and as he watched the men setting things to order—mending the doors and repairing the broken furniture—he drew mental pictures that made his eyes flash with pleasure.

He felt that by this time Keats and his men should have settled with Taylor. After that, he, himself, would make the girl pay.

So he was having the house put in order, that it would again be habitable; and then, when that was done, and Taylor out of the way, he would go to the Arrow after the girl. But before he went to the Arrow he would await the return of Keats with the news that Taylor would no longer be able to thwart him.

Never in his life had he met a man he feared as he feared Taylor. There was something about Taylor that made Carrington's soul shrivel. He knew what it was—it was his conviction of Taylor's absolute honorableness, as arrayed against his own beastly impulses. But that knowledge merely served to intensify his hatred for Taylor.

Toward evening Carrington rode back to Dawes with the men; and while there he sought news from Keats. Danforth, from whom he inquired, could tell him nothing, and so Carrington knew that Taylor had not yet been

disposed of. But Carrington knew the time would not be long now; and in a resort of a questionable character he found two men who listened eagerly to his proposals. Later, the two men accompanying him, he again rode to the big house.

And just as dusk began to settle over the big level at the foot of the long slope—and while the last glowing light from the day still softly bathed the big house, throwing it into bold relief on the crest of its flat-topped hill, Carrington was standing on the front porch, impatiently scanning the basin for signs of Keats and his men.

For a time he could distinguish little in the basin, for the mists of twilight were heavy down there. And then a moving object far out in the basin caught his gaze, and he leaned forward, peering intently, consumed with eagerness and curiosity.

A few minutes later, still staring into the basin, Carrington became aware that there were two moving objects. They were headed toward Dawes, and proceeding slowly; and at last, when they came nearer and he saw they were two women, on horses, he stiffened and shaded his eyes with his hands. And then he exclaimed sharply, and his eyes glowed with triumph—for he had recognized the women as Marion Harland and Martha.

Moving slowly, so that he might not attract the atten-

tion of the women, should they happen to be looking toward the big house, he went inside and spoke shortly to the two men he had brought with him.

An instant later the three, Carrington leading, rode into the timber surrounding the house, filed silently through it, and with their horses in a slow trot, sank down the long slope that led into the big basin.

For a time they were not visible, as they worked their way through the chaparral on a little level near the bottom of the slope; and then they came into view again in some tall saccaton grass that grew as high as the backs of their horses.

They might have been swimmig in that much water, for all the sound they made as they headed through the grass toward the Dawes trail, for they made no sound, and only their heads and the heads of their horses appeared above the swaying grass.

But they were seen. Martha, riding at a little distance behind Marion, and straining her eyes to watch the trail ahead, noted the movement in the saccaton, and called sharply to the girl:

"They's somethin' movin' in that grass off to your right, honey! It wouldn't be no cattle, heah; they's never no cattle round heah, fo' they ain't no water. Lawsy!" she exclaimed, as she got a clear view of them; "it's men!"

Marion halted her horse. Martha's voice had startled

her, for she had not been thinking of the present; her thoughts had been centered on Taylor.

A shiver of trepidation ran over her, though, when she saw the men, and she gathered the reins tightly in her hands, ready to wheel the animal under her should the appearance of the men indicate the imminence of danger.

And when she saw that danger did indeed threaten, she spoke to the horse and turned it toward the back trail. For she had recognized one of the three men as Carrington.

But the horse had not taken a dozen leaps before Carrington was beside her, his hand at her bridle. And as her horse came to a halt, Carrington's animal lunged against it, bringing the two riders close together. Carrington leaned over, his face close to hers; she could feel his breath in her face as he laughed jeeringly, his voice vibrating with passion:

"So it is you, eh? I thought for a moment that I had made a mistake!" Holding to her horse's bridle-rein with a steady pull that kept the horses close together, he spoke sharply to the two men who had halted near Martha: "Get the nigger! I'll take care of this one!"

And instantly, with a brutal, ruthless strength and energy that took the girl completely by surprise, Carrington threw a swift arm out, grasped her by the waist, drew her out of the saddle, and swung her into his own, cross-wise, so that she lay face up, looking at him.

She fought him then, silently, ferociously, though futilely. For he caught her hands, using both his own, pinning hers so that she could not use them, meanwhile laughing lowly at her efforts to escape.

Even in the dusk she could see the smiling, savage exultation in his eyes; the gloating, vindictive triumph, and her soul revolted at the horror in store for her, and the knowledge nerved her to another mighty effort. Tearing her hands free, she fought him again, scratching his face, striking him with all her force with her fists; squirming and twisting, even biting one of his hands when it came close to her lips as he essayed to grasp her throat, his eyes gleaming with ruthless malignance.

But her efforts availed little. In the end her arms were pinned again to her sides, and he pulled a rope from his saddle-horn and bound them. Then, as she lay back and glared at him, muttering imprecations that brought a mocking smile to his lips, he urged his horse forward, and sent it clattering up the slope, the two men following with Martha.

CHAPTER XXX

PARSONS HAS HUMAN INSTINCTS

ELAM PARSONS stood on the front porch of the Arrow ranchhouse for a long time after Marion and Martha departed, watching them as they slowly negotiated the narrow trail that led toward Dawes. Something of the man's guilt assailed his consciousness as he stood there — a conception of the miserable part he had played in the girl's life.

No doubt had not Fate and Carrington played a mean trick on Parsons, in robbing him of his money and his prospects, the man would not have entertained the thoughts he entertained at this moment; for success would have made a reckoning with conscience a remote possibility, dim and far.

And perhaps it was not conscience that was now troubling Parsons; at least Parsons did not lay the burden of his present thoughts upon so intangible a chimera. Parsons was too much of a materialist to admit he had a conscience.

But a twinge of something seized Parsons as he watched the girl ride away, and bitter thoughts racked his soul. He could not, however, classify his emotions,

and so he stood there on the porch, undecided, vacillating, in the grip of a vague disquiet.

Parsons sat on the porch until long after noon; for, after Marion and Martha had vanished into the haze of distance, Parsons dropped into a chair and let his chin sink to his chest.

He did not get up to prepare food for himself; he did not think of eating, for the big, silent ranchhouse and the gloomy, vacant appearance of the other buildings drew the man's attention to the aching emptiness of his own life. He had sought to gain everything—scheming, planning, plotting dishonestly; taking unfair advantage; robbing people without compunction—and he had gained nothing. Yes—he had gained Carrington's contempt!

The recollection of Carrington's treatment of him fired his passions with a thousand licking, leaping flames. In his gloomy meditations over the departure of the girl, he had almost forgotten Carrington. But he thought of Carrington now; and he sat stiff and rigid in the chair, glowering, his lips in a pout, his soul searing with hatred.

But even the nursing of that passion failed to satisfy Parsons. Something lacked. There was still that conviction of utter baseness—his own baseness—to torture him. And at last, toward evening, he discovered that he longed for the girl. He wanted to be near her; he wanted to do something for her to undo the wrong he had done her; he wanted to make some sort of reparation.

So the man assured himself. But he knew that deep in his inner consciousness lurked the dread knowledge that Taylor was aware of his baseness. For Taylor had overheard the conversation between Carrington and himself on the train, and Parsons feared that should Taylor by any chance escape Keats and his men and return to the Arrow to find Marion gone, he would vent his rage and fury upon the man who had sinned against the woman he loved. That was the emotion which dominated Parsons as he sat on the porch; it was the emotion that made the man fervently desire to make reparation to the girl; it was the emotion that finally moved him out of his chair and upon a horse that he found in the stable, to ride toward Dawes in the hope of finding her.

Parsons, too, stopped at the Mullarky cabin. He discovered that Marion had left there shortly before, after having refused Mrs. Mullarky's proffer of shelter until the charge against Taylor could be disproved.

Parsons listened impatiently to the woman's voluble defense of Taylor, and her condemnation of Keats and all those who were leagued against the Arrow owner. And then Parsons rode on.

Far out in the basin, indistinct in the twilight haze, he saw Marion and Martha riding toward Dawes, and he urged his horse in an effort to come up with them before they reached the bottom of the long, gradual rise that would take them into town.

Parsons had got within half a mile of them when he saw them halt and wait the coming of three horsemen, who advanced toward them from the opposite direction. Parsons did not feel like joining the group, for just at that moment he felt as though he could not bear to have anyone see his face—they might have discovered the guilt in it—and so he waited.

He saw the three men ride close to the other riders; he watched in astonishment while one of the strange riders pursued one of the women, catching her.

Parsons saw it all. But he did not ride forward, for he was in the grip of a mighty terror that robbed him of power to move. For he knew one of the strange riders was Carrington. He would have recognized him among a thousand other men.

Parsons watched the three men climb the big slope that led to the great house on the flat-topped hill. For many minutes after they had reached the crest of the hill Parsons sat motionless on his horse, gazing upward. And when he saw a light flare up in one of the rooms of the big house, he cursed, his face convulsed with impotent rage.

Marion Harlan did not yield to the overpowering weakness that seized her after she realized that further resistance to Carrington would be useless. And instead of yielding to the hysteria that threatened her, she clenched

her hands and bit her lips in an effort to retain her composure. She succeeded. And during the progress of her captor's horse up the long slope she kept a good grip on herself, fortifying herself against what might come when she and her captor reached the big house.

When they reached the crest of the hill, Carrington ordered the two men to take Martha around to the back of the house and confine her in one of the rooms. One man was to guard her. The other was to wait on the front porch until Carrington called him.

The girl had decided to make one more struggle when Carrington dismounted with her, but though she fought hard and bitterly, she did not succeed in escaping Carrington, and the latter finally lifted her in his arms and carried her into the front room, the room in which Carrington had fought with Taylor the day Taylor had killed the three men who had ambushed him.

Carrington lighted a lamp—it was this light Parsons had seen from the basin—placed it on a shelf, and in its light grinned triumphantly at the girl.

“Well, we are here,” he said.

In his voice was that passion that had been in it that other time, when he had pursued her into the house, and she had escaped him by hiding in the attic. She cringed from him, backing away a little, and, noting the movement, he laughed hoarsely.

“Don't worry,” he said, “at least for an hour or two.

I've got something more important on my mind. Do you know what it is?" he demanded, grinning hugely. "It's Taylor!" He suddenly seemed to remember that he did not know why she had been abroad at dusk on the Dawes trail, and he came close to her.

"Did you see Keats today?"

She did not answer, meeting his gaze fairly, her eyes flashing with scorn and contempt. But he knew from the flame in her eyes that she *had* seen Keats, and he laughed derisively.

"So you saw him," he jeered; "and you know that he came for Taylor. Did he find Taylor at the Arrow?"

Again she did not answer, and he went on, suspecting that Taylor had not been at the Arrow, and that Keats had gone to search for him. "No, Keats didn't find him—that's plain enough. I should have enjoyed being there to hear Keats tell you that Taylor had killed your father. You heard that, didn't you? Yes," he added, his grin broadening; "you heard that. So that's why you left the Arrow! Well, I don't blame you for leaving."

He turned toward the door and wheeled again to face her. "You'll enjoy this," he sneered; "you've been so thick with Taylor. Bah!" he added as he saw her face redden at the insult; "I've known where you stood with Taylor ever since I caught you flirting with him on the station platform the day we came to Dawes. That's why you went to the Arrow from here—refusing my

attentions to *give* yourself to the man who killed your father!"

He laughed, and saw her writhe under the sound of it.

"It hurts, eh?" he said venomously; "well, this will hurt, too. Keats went out to get Taylor, but he will never bring Taylor in—alive. He has orders to kill him—understand? That's why I've got more important business than you to attend to for the next few hours. I'm going to Dawes to find out if Keats has returned. And when Keats comes in with the news that Taylor is done for, I'm coming back here for you!"

Calling the man who was waiting on the porch, Carington directed him to watch the girl; and then, with a last grin at her, he went out, mounted his horse, and rode the trail toward Dawes. And as he rode, he laughed maliciously, for he had not told her that the charge against Taylor was a false one, and that, so far as he knew, Taylor was not guilty of murdering her father.

CHAPTER XXXI

A RESCUE

AN EARLY moon stuck a pallid rim over the crest of the big, hill-like plateau as Parsons sat on his horse in the basin, and Parsons watched it rise in its silvery splendor and bathe the world with an effulgent glow. It threw house and timber on the plateau crest in bold relief, a dark silhouette looming against a flood of shimmering light, and Parsons could see the porch he knew so well, and could even distinguish the break in the timber that led to the house, which merged into the trail that stretched to Dawes.

Parsons was still laboring with the devils of indecision and doubt. He knew why Carrington had captured Marion, and he yearned to take the girl from the man — for her own sake, and for the purpose of satisfying his vengeance. But he knew that certain death awaited him up there should he venture to show himself to Carrington. And yet a certain desperate courage stole into Parsons as he watched from the basin, and when, about half an hour after he had seen the flicker of light filter out of one of the windows of the house, he saw a man emerge, mount a horse, and ride away, he drew a deep breath of resolution

and urged his own horse up the slope. For the man who had mounted the horse up there was Carrington—there could be no doubt of that.

Shivering, though still obeying the courageous impulse that had seized him, Parsons continued to ascend the slope. He went half way and then halted, listening. No sound disturbed the solemn stillness that had followed Carrington's departure.

Reassured, though by this time he was sweating coldly, Parsons accomplished the remainder of the intervening space upward. Far back in the timber he brought his horse to a halt, dismounted, and again listened. Hearing nothing that alarmed him, except a loud, angry voice from the rear of the house—a voice which he knew as Martha's—he cautiously made his way to the front porch, tiptoed across it, and peered stealthily into the room out of which the light still shone, its flickering rays stabbing weakly into the outside darkness.

Looking into the room, Parsons could see Marion sitting in a chair. Her hands were bound, and she was leaning back in the chair, her hair disheveled, her face chalk-white, and her eyes filled with a haunting, terrible dread. Near the door, likewise seated on a chair, his back to the big room that adjoined the one in which he sat, was a villainous-looking man who was watching the girl with a leering grin.

The sight brought a murderous passion into Parsons'

heart, nerving him for the deed that instantly suggested itself to him. He crept off the porch again, moving stealthily lest he make the slightest sound that would warn the watcher at the door, and searched at a corner of the porch until he found what he was looking for—a heavy club, a spoke from one of the wheels of a wagon.

Parsons knew about where to find it, for during the days that he had sat on the porch nursing his resentment against Carrington, he had gazed long at the wagon-spoke, wishing that he might have an opportunity to use it on Carrington.

He took it, balancing it, testing its weight. And now a hideous terror seized him, almost paralyzing him. For though Parsons had robbed many men, he had never resorted to violence; and for a time he stood with the club in his hand, unable to move.

He moved at last, though, his face transformed from the strength of the passion that had returned, and he carefully stepped on the porch, crossed it, and stood, leaning forward, peering into the room through the outside door left open by Carrington. The outside door opened from the big room adjoining that in which the watcher sat, and Parsons could see the man, who, with his back toward the door, was still looking at Marion.

Entering the big room, Parsons saw Marion's eyes widen as she looked full at him. He shook his head at

her; her face grew whiter, and she began to talk to the other man.

Only a second or two elapsed then until Parsons struck. The man rolled out of his chair without a sound, and Parsons, leaping over him, trembling, his breath coming in great gasps, ran to Marion and unbound her hands.

Together they flew outside, where they found the girl's horse tethered near a tree, and Parsons' animal standing where he had left it.

Mounting, the girl whispered to Parsons. She was trembling, and her voice broke with a wailing quaver when she spoke:

"Where shall we go, Elam—where? We—I can't go back to the Arrow! Oh, I just can't! And Carrington will be back! Oh! isn't there *any* way to escape him?"

"We'll go to Dawes, girl; that's where we'll go!" declared Parsons, his dread and fear of the big man equaling that of the girl. We'll go to Dawes and tell them there just what kind of a man Carrington is—and what he has tried to do with you tonight! There must be some men in Dawes who will not stand by and see a woman persecuted!"

And as they rode the river trail toward the town, the girl, white and silent, riding a little distance ahead of him, Parsons felt for the first time in his life the tingling thrills that come of an unselfish deed courageously performed.

And the experience filled him with the spirit to do other good and unselfish deeds.

They rode fast for a time, until the girl again spoke of Carrington's announced intention to return shortly. Then they rode more cautiously, and it was well they did. For they had almost reached Dawes when they heard the whipping tread of a horse's hoofs on the trail, coming toward them. They rode well back from the trail, and, concealed by some heavy brush, saw Carrington riding toward the big house. He went past them, vanishing into the shadows of the trees that fringed the trail, and for a long time the girl and Parsons did not move for fear Carrington might have slowed his horse and would hear them. And when they did come out of their concealment and were again on the Dawes trail, they rode fast, with the dread of Carrington's wrath to spur them on.

It *had* been Martha's voice that Parsons had heard when he had been standing in the timber near the front of the house. The negro woman was walking back and forth in the room where her captor had confined her, vigorously berating the man. She was a dusky thundercloud of wrath, who rumbled verbal imprecations with every breath. Her captor—a small man with a coarse voice, a broken nose, and a scraggy, drooping mustache—stood in the doorway looking at her fiercely, with obvious intent to intimidate the indignant Amazon.

At the instant Parsons heard her voice she was confronting the man, her eyes popping with fury.

"You let me out of heah this minute, yo' white trash! Yo' heah! An' doan' you think I's scared of you, 'cause I ain't! If you doan' hop away from that do', I's goin' to mash yo' haid in wif this yere chair! You git away now!"

The man grinned. It was a forced grin, and his face whitened with it, betraying to Martha the fear he felt of her—which she had suspected from the moment he had brought her in and the light from the kitchen lamp shone on his face.

She took a threatening step toward him; a tentative movement, a testing of his courage. And when she saw him retreat from her slightly, she lunged at him, raising the chair she held in her hands.

Possibly the man was reluctant to resort to violence; he may have had a conviction that the detaining of Martha was not at all necessary to the success of Carrington's plan to subjugate the white girl, or he might have been merely afraid of Martha. Whatever his thoughts, the man continued to retreat from the negro woman, and as she pursued him, her courage grew, and the man's vanished in inverse ratio. And as he passed the center of the kitchen, he wheeled and ran out of the door, Martha following him.

Outside, the man ran toward the stable. For an instant

Martha stood looking after him. Then, thinking Carrington was still in the house, and that there was no hope of her frightening him as she had frightened the little man who had stood guard over her, she ran to where her horse stood, clambered into the saddle, and sent the animal down the big slope toward Mullarky's cabin, where she hoped to find Mullarky, to send him to the big house to rescue the girl from Carrington.

CHAPTER XXXII

TAYLOR BECOMES RILED

BY THE time Bud Hemmingway had finished his grotesque expression of the delight that had seized him, and had got to his knees and was grinning widely at Taylor, the horses of the Arrow outfit were running down the neck of the gorge, their hoofs drumming on the hard floor of the bottom, awakening echoes that filled the gorge with an incessant rumbling clatter that might have caused one to think a regiment of cavalry was advancing at a gallop.

Bud turned his gaze up the gorge and saw them.

"Ain't they great!" he yelled at Taylor. The leap in Bud's voice betrayed something of the strained tenseness with which the man had endured his besiegement.

And now that there was an even chance for him, Bud's old humorous and carefree impulses were again ascendant. He got to his feet, grinning, the spirit of battle in his eyes, and threw a shot at a Keats man, far up on a hillside, who had left his concealment and was running upward. At the report of the rifle the man reeled, caught himself, and continued to clamber upward, another bullet from Bud's rifle throwing up a dust spray at his feet.

Other figures were now running; the slopes of the hills in the vicinity were dotted with moving black spots as the Keats men, also hearing the clattering of hoofs, and divining that their advantage was gone, made a concerted break for their horses, which they had hidden in a ravine beyond the hills.

Taylor did not do any shooting. While Bud was standing erect among the pile of rocks which had served as a shelter for him during the afternoon, his rifle growing hot in his hands, and picturesque curses issued from his lips, Taylor walked to Spotted Tail and tightened the saddle cinches. This task did not take him long, but by the time it was finished the Arrow outfit had dispersed the Keats men, who were fleeing toward Dawes in scattered units.

Bothwell, big and grim, rode to where Taylor was standing, his voice booming as he looked sharply at Taylor.

"I reckon we got here just in time, boss!" he said. "They didn't git you or Bud? No?" at Taylor's grin. "Well, we're wipin' them out—that's all! That Keats bunch can't run in no raw deal like that on the Arrow—not while I'm range boss. Law? Bah! Every damned man that runs with Keats would have stretched hemp before this if they'd have been any law in the country! A clean-up, eh—that's what they tryin' to pull off. Well, watch my smoke!"

His voice leaping with passion, Bothwell slapped his horse sharply, and as the animal leaped down the trail toward Dawes, Bothwell shouted to the other men of the outfit, who had halted at a little distance back in the gorge:

“Come a runnin’, you yaps! That ornery bunch can’t git out of this section without hittin’ the basin trail!”

Bothwell and the others fled down the gorge like a devastating whirlwind before Taylor could offer a word of objection.

As a matter of fact, Taylor had paid little attention to Bothwell’s threats. He knew that the big range boss was in a bitter rage, and he had been aware of the ill-feeling that had existed for some time between Keats and his friends and the men of the Arrow outfit.

But the deserved punishment of Keats was not the burden his mind carried at this instant. Dominating every other thought in Taylor’s brain was the obvious, naked fact that Carrington had struck at him again; that he had struck underhandedly, as usual; and that he would continue to fight with that method until he was victorious or beaten.

And yet Taylor was not so much concerned over the blow that had been aimed at him as he was of its probable effect upon Marion Harlan. For of course the girl had heard of the charge by this time—or she would hear of it. It would be all the same in the end. And at a blow

the girl's faith in him would be destroyed — the faith that he had been nurturing, and upon which he had built his hopes.

To be sure he had Larry Harlan's note to show her, to convince her of his innocence, but he knew that once the poison of suspicion and doubt got into her heart, she could never give him that complete confidence of which he had dreamed. She might, now that Carrington had spread his poison, conclude that he had forged the note, trusting in it to disarm the suspicions of herself and of the world. And if she were to demand why he had not shown her the note before — when she had first come to the Arrow — he could not tell her that he had determined never to show it to her, lest she understand that he knew her mother's sordid history. That secret, he had promised himself, she would never know; nor would she ever know of the vicious significance of that conversation he had overheard between Carrington and Parsons on the train coming to Dawes. He was convinced that if she knew these things she would never be able to look him in the eyes again.

Therefore, knowing the damage Carrington had wrought by bringing the charge of murder against him, Taylor's rage was now definitely centered upon his enemy. The pursuit and punishment of Keats was a matter of secondary consideration in his mind — Bothwell and the men of the outfit would take care of the man. But Taylor could no longer fight off the terrible rage that had seized

him over the knowledge of Carrington's foul methods, and when he mounted Spotted Tail and urged him down the trail toward the Arrow ranchhouse, there was a set to his lips that caused Norton, who had brought his horse to a halt near him, to look sharply at him and draw a quick breath.

Not speaking to Norton, nor to Bud—who had also remained to watch him—Taylor straightened Spotted Tail to the trail and sent him flying toward the Arrow. Taylor looked neither to the right nor left, nor did he speak to Norton and Bud, who rode hard after him. Down the trail at a point where the neck of the gorge broadened and merged into the grass level that stretched, ever widening, to the Arrow, Spotted Tail and his rider flashed past a big cluster of low hills from which came flame-streaks and the sharp, cracking reports of rifles, the yells of men in pain, and the hoarse curses of men in the grip of the fighting rage.

But Taylor might not have heard the sounds. Certainly he could not have seen the flame-streaks, unless he glimpsed them out of the corners of his eyes, for he did not turn his head as he urged Spotted Tail on, speeding him over the great green sweep of grass at a pace that the big horse had never yet been ridden.

Laboring behind him, for they knew that something momentous impended, Norton and Bud tried their best to keep up with the flying beast ahead of them. But the

sorrel ridden by Norton, and even the great, rangy, lion-hearted King, could not hold the pace that Spotted Tail set for them, and they fell slowly back until, when still several miles from the Arrow, horse and rider vanished into the dusk ahead of them.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RETRIBUTION

TWICE descending the long slope leading to the basin, Martha's horse stumbled. The first time the negro woman lifted him to his feet by jerking sharply on the reins, but when he stumbled the second time, Martha was not alert and the horse went to his knees. Unprepared, Martha was jolted out of the saddle and she fell awkwardly, landing on her right shoulder with a force that knocked the breath out of her.

She lay for a short time, gasping, her body racked with pain, and at last, when she succeeded in getting to her feet, the horse had strayed some little distance from her and was quietly browsing the tops of some saccaton.

It was several minutes before Martha caught the animal—several minutes during which she loosed some picturesque and original profanity that caused the experienced range horse to raise his ears inquiringly.

Then, when she caught the horse, she had some trouble getting into the saddle, though she succeeded after a while, groaning, and grunting, and whimpering.

But Martha forgot her pains and misery once she was in the saddle again, and she rode fast, trembling with

eagerness, her sympathies and her concern solely for the white girl who, she supposed, was a prisoner in the hands of the ruthless and unprincipled man that Martha, with her limited vocabulary, had termed many times a "rascalion."

Martha headed her horse straight for the Mullarky cabin, guided by a faint shaft of light that issued from one of its windows.

When she reached the cabin she found no one there but Mrs. Mullarky. Ben, Mrs. Mullarky told Martha, had gone to Dawes—in fact, he had been in Dawes all day, she supposed, for he had left home early that morning.

Martha gasped out her news, and Mrs. Mullarky's face whitened. While Martha watched her in astonishment, she tore off the gingham apron that adorned her, threw it into a corner, and ran into another room, from which she emerged an instant later carrying a rifle.

The Irishwoman's face was pale and set, and the light of a great wrath gleamed in her eyes. Martha, awed by the woman's belligerent appearance, could only stand and blink at her, her mouth gaping with astonishment.

"You go right on to the Arrow!" she commanded Martha, as she went out of the door; "mebbe you'll find somebody there by this time, an' if you do, send them to the big house. I'm goin' over there right this minute to take that dear little girl away from that big brute!"

She started while Martha was again painfully mount-

ing her horse, and the two women rode away in opposite directions—Martha whimpering with pain, and Mrs. Mullarky silent, grim, with a wild rage gripping her heart.

Taylor, on Spotted Tail, was approaching the Arrow ranchhouse at a speed slightly greater than that into which the big horse had fallen shortly after he had left the gorge. The spirited animal was just warming to his work, and he was doing his best when he flashed past the big cattle corral, going with the noise of rushing wind. In an instant he was at the long stretch of fence which formed the ranchyard side of the horse corral, and in another instant he was sliding to a halt near the edge of the front porch of the ranchhouse itself. There he drew a deep breath and looked inquiringly at his master, while the latter slid off his back, leaped upon the porch, and with a bound crossed the porch floor, knocking chairs helter-skelter as he went.

The house was dark, but Taylor ran through the rooms, calling sharply for Parsons and Marion, but receiving no reply. When he emerged from the house his face, in the light of the moon that had climbed above the horizon some time before, was like that of a man who has just looked upon the dead face of his best friend.

For Taylor was convinced that he had looked upon death in the ranchhouse—upon the death of his hopes. He stood for an instant on the porch, while his passions

raged through him, and then with a laugh of bitter humor he leaped on Spotted Tail.

Half-way to the Mullarky cabin, with the big horse running like the wind, Taylor saw a shape looming out of the darkness ahead of him. He pulled Spotted Tail down, and loosed one of his pistols, and approached the shape warily, his muscles stiff and taut and ready for action.

But it was only Martha who rode up to him. Her fortitude gone, her pains convulsing her, she wailed to Taylor the story of the night's tragic adventure.

"An' Carrington's got missy in the big house!" she concluded. "She fit him powerful hard, but it was no use — that rascalion too much fo' her!"

She shouted the last words at Taylor, for Spotted Tail had received a jab in the sides with the rowels that hurt him cruelly, and, angered, he ran like a deer with the hungry cry of a wolf-pack in his ears.

Like a black streak they rushed by Mrs. Mullarky, who breathed a fervent, "Oh, thank the Lord, it's Taylor!" and before the good woman could catch her breath again, Spotted Tail and his rider had opened a huge, yawning space between himself and the laboring horse the woman rode.

Riding with all his muscles taut as bowstrings, and a terrible, constricting pressure across his chest — so mighty were the savage passions that rioted within him — Taylor

reached the foot of the long slope that led to the big house, and sent Spotted Tail tearing upward with rapid, desperate leaps.

When Carrington reached the big house soon after he had unknowingly passed Marion Harlan and Parsons on the river trail, he was in a sullen, impatient mood.

For no word concerning Keats's movements had reached Dawes, and Carrington was afflicted with a gloomy presentiment that something had happened to the man—that he had not been able to locate Taylor, or that he *had* found him and Taylor had succeeded in escaping him.

Carrington did not go at once into the house, for captive though she was, and completely within his power, he did not want the girl to see him in his present mood. Lighting a cigar, and chewing it viciously, he walked to the stable. There, standing in the shadow of the building, he came upon the guard Martha had routed. He spoke sharply to the man, asking him why he was not inside guarding the "nigger."

The man brazenly announced that Martha had escaped him, omitting certain details and substituting others from his imagination.

"If she hadn't been a woman, now," added the man in self-extenuation.

Carrington laughed lowly. "We didn't need *her*, anyway," he said, and the other laughed with him.

The laugh restored Carrington's good-nature, and he left the man and went into the front room of the house. Had he paused on the porch to listen, or had he glanced toward the big slope that dropped to the basin, he would not have entered the house just then. And he *would* have paused on the porch had it not been that the intensity of his desires drove him to concentrate all his senses upon Marion.

He crossed the porch and entered the room, and then halted, staring downward with startled eyes at the body of the guard huddled on the floor, a thin stream of blood staining the carpet beneath his head.

Cursing, Carrington stepped into the other room—the room in which he had fought with Taylor—the room in which he had left Marion Harlan bound and sitting on a chair. The lamp on the shelf was still burning, and in its light Carrington saw the rope he had used to bind the girl's hands.

A bitter rage seized him as he looked at the rope, and he threw it from him, cursing. In an instant he was outside the house and had leaped upon his horse. He headed the animal toward the long slope leading to the Arrow trail, for he suspected the girl would go straight back there, despite any conviction she might have of Taylor's guilt—for there she would find Parsons, who would give her what comfort he could. Or she might stop at the Mullarky cabin. Certainly she would not go to Dawes,

for she must know that *he* ruled Dawes — Parsons must have told her that — and that if she went to Dawes, she would be merely postponing her surrender to him.

He had plenty of time, even if she were in Dawes, he meditated as he sent his horse over the crest of the slope, for there were no trains out of the town during the night, and if she were not at the Arrow or Mullarky's, he was sure to catch her later.

He was half-way down the slope, his horse making slow work of threading its way through the gnarled chaparral growth, when, looking downward, he saw another horse leaping up the slope toward him.

In the glare of the moon that was behind Carrington, he could see horse and rider distinctly, and he jerked his own horse to a halt, cursing horribly. For the horse that was leaping toward him like a black demon out of the night was Spotted Tail. And Spotted Tail's rider was Taylor. Carrington could see the man's face, with the terrible passion that distorted it, and Carrington wheeled his horse, making frenzied efforts to escape up the slope.

Carrington was not more than a hundred feet from the big black horse and its indomitable rider when he wheeled his own animal, and he had not traveled more than a few feet when he realized that Spotted Tail was gaining rapidly.

Cursing again, though his face was ghastly with the fear that had seized him, Carrington slipped from his

horse, and, running around so that the animal was between him and Taylor, he drew a heavy pistol from a hip-pocket. And when the oncoming horse and rider were within twenty-five or thirty feet of him, Carrington took deliberate aim and fired.

He grinned vindictively as he saw Taylor reel in the saddle, and he fired again, and saw Taylor drop to the ground beside Spotted Tail.

Carrington could not tell whether his second shot had struck Taylor, and before he could shoot again, Taylor dove headlong toward a jagged rock that thrust a bulging shoulder upward. Carrington threw a snapshot at him as he leaped, but again he could not have told whether the bullet had gone home.

Keeping the horse between himself and the rock behind which Taylor had thrown himself, Carrington leaped behind another that stood near the edge of the chaparral clump through which he had been riding when he had seen Taylor coming up the slope. Seeming to sense their danger, both horses slowly moved off out of the line of fire and proceeded unconcernedly to browse the clumps of grass that dotted the side of the slope.

And now began a long, strained silence. Carrington could see Taylor's rock, but it was at the edge of the chaparral, and Taylor might easily slip into the chaparral and begin a circling movement that would bring him behind Carrington. The thought brought a damp sweat

out upon Carrington's forehead, and he began to cast fearing glances toward the chaparral at his side. He watched it long, and the longer he watched, the greater grew his fear. And at last, at the end of half an hour, the fear grew to a conviction that Taylor *was* stalking him in the chaparral. No longer able to endure the suspense, Carrington left the shelter of his rock and began to work his way around the edge of the chaparral clump.

Taylor had felt the heat and the shock of Carrington's first bullet, and he knew it had gone into his left arm. The second bullet had missed him cleanly, and he landed behind the rock, with all his senses alert, paying no attention to his wound.

He had recognized Carrington, and with the cold calm that comes with implacable determination, Taylor instantly began to take an inventory of the hazards and the advantages of his position. And after his examination was concluded, he dropped to his hands and knees and began to work his way into the chaparral.

He moved cautiously, for he knew that should he disturb the rank growth he would disclose his whereabouts to Carrington, should the latter have gained a vantageous point from where he could watch the thicket for just such signs of Taylor's presence.

But Taylor made no such signs; he had not spent the greater part of his life in the open to be outdone in this

grim strategy by an eastern man. He grinned wickedly at the thought.

He suspected that Carrington might try the very trick he himself was trying, and that thought made him wary.

Working his way into the thicket, he at last reached a point near its center, upon a slight mound surrounded by stunt oak and quivering aspen. There, concealed and alert, he waited for Carrington to show himself.

Carrington, though, did not betray his presence in the thicket. For Carrington was not in the thicket when Taylor reached its center. Carrington had started into the thicket, but he had not proceeded very far when he began to be afflicted with a dread premonition of Taylor's presence somewhere in the vicinity.

A clammy sweat broke out on the big man; a panic of fear seized him, and he began to creep backward, out of the thicket. And by the time Taylor reached his vantage-point, Carrington was crouching at the thicket's edge, near the rock where he had been concealed, oppressed with a conviction that Taylor was working his way toward him through the thicket.

The big man waited, his nerves taut, his muscles quivering and cringing at the thought that any instant a bullet sent at him by Taylor might strike him. For he knew that Taylor had come for him; he was now convinced that Marion Harlan *had* gone to the Arrow, that she had told Taylor what had happened to her, and that

Taylor had come straight to the big house to punish him for his misdeeds.

And Carrington had a dread of the sort of punishment Taylor had dealt him upon a former occasion, and he wanted no more of it. That was why he had used his pistol instantly upon recognizing Taylor. He wished, now, that he had not been so hasty; for he had taken the initiative, and Taylor would not scruple to imitate him.

In fact, he was so certain that at that moment Taylor was creeping upon him from some point with the fury of murder in his heart, that he got to his feet and, looking over the top of the rock, searched with wild eyes for his horse. And when he saw the animal not more than twenty or thirty feet from him, he could not longer resist the panic that had seized him. Crouching, he ran for several yards on his hands and feet and then, nearing his horse, he stood upright and ran for it.

As he ran he cringed, for he expected a pistol-shot to greet his appearance at the side of his horse. But no report came, and he reached the horse, threw himself into the saddle and raced the animal down the slope.

He was conscious of a pulse of elation, for he thought he had eluded Taylor, but just as his horse struck the edge of the big level Carrington looked back, to see Spotted Tail slipping down the slope with a smooth swiftness that terrified the big man.

He turned then and began to ride as he had never ridden before. The animal under him was strong, courageous, and speedy; but Carrington knew he would have need of all those sterling qualities if he hoped to escape the iron-hearted horse Taylor bestrode. And so Carrington leaned forward, trying to lighten the load, slapping the beast's neck with the palm of his hand, urging him with his voice—coaxing him to the best endeavors. For Carrington knew that somewhere in the vast expanse of grass land and spread before him Keats and his men must be. And his only hope lay in reaching them before the avenger, astride the big horse that was speeding on his trail like a black thunderbolt, could bring his rider within pistol-shot distance of him.

But Carrington had not gone more than half a mile when he realized that the race was to be a short one. Twice after leaving the edge of the slope Carrington looked back. The first time Spotted Tail seemed to be far away; and the next time the big, black animal was so close that Carrington cried out hoarsely.

And then as Carrington felt the distance being shortened—as he felt the presence of the black horse almost at the withers of his own animal—heard the breathing of the big pursuing beast, he knew that he was not to be shot.

Before he could swing his own horse to escape, the big, black horse was beside his own, and one of Taylor's

arms shot out, the fingers gripping the collar of the big man's coat. Then with a vicious pull, swinging the black horse wide, Taylor jerked Carrington out of the saddle, so that he fell sidewise into the deep grass—while the black horse, eager for a run, and not immediately responding to Taylor's pull on the reins, ran some feet before he halted and wheeled.

And when he did finally face toward the spot where the big man had been jerked from the saddle, it was to face a succession of flame-streaks that shot from the spot where Carrington stood trying his best to send into Taylor a bullet that would put an end to the horrible presentiment of death that now filled the big man's heart.

He emptied his pistol and saw the black horse coming steadily toward him, its rider erect in the saddle, seeming not to heed the savagely barking weapon. And when the gun was empty, Carrington threw it from him and began to run. He ran, and with grim mockery, Taylor followed him a little distance—followed him until Carrington, exhausted, his breath coming in great coughing gasps, could run no farther. And then Taylor brought the big black to a halt near him, slid easily out of the saddle, and stepped forward to look into Carrington's face, his own stiff and set, his eyes gleaming with a passion that made the other man groan hopelessly.

"Now, you miserable whelp!" said Taylor.

He lunged forward and the bodies of the two men made

a swaying blot out of which came the sounds of blows, bitter and savage.

The little broken-nosed man laughed a little in recollection of Carrington's words about Martha. The big man had let him off easily, and he was properly grateful. And yet his gratitude did not prevent him from betraying curiosity; and he watched the front of the house for Carrington's reappearance, wondering what he meant to do with the white girl, now that he had her.

Still watching the front porch, he saw Carrington run for his horse, leap upon it and sink down the side of the slope.

The little man then ran to the front of the house and, concealed among the trees, watched the duel that was waged in the moonlight. He saw Carrington break from the thicket, mount his horse and race out into the plain; he saw Taylor—for he had recognized him—send Spotted Tail after Carrington. But he did not see the finish of the race, nor did he see what followed. But some minutes later he saw a big, black horse tearing toward him from the spot where the race had ended. He muttered gutturally and profanely, leaped on his horse and sent it plunging down the trail toward Dawes, his face ghastly with fear.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE WILL OF THE MOB

PARSONS had always been an unemotional man. His own character being immune to the little twinging impulses of humanness that grow to generous and unselfish deeds, he had looked with derision upon all persons who betrayed concern for their fellow-men. And so Parsons had lived apart from his fellows; he had watched them from across the gulf of disinterest, where emotion was foreign.

But tonight Parsons was learning what emotion is. Not from others, but from himself. Emotions—thousands of them seethed in his brain and heart. He was in an advanced state of hysteria when he rode down the Dawes trail with Marion Harlan. For there was the huge, implacable, ruthless, and murderous Carrington, whom he had just passed on the trail, to menace his very life—and he knew that just as soon as Carrington returned to the big house and found Marion gone and the guard dead, he would ride back to Dawes, seeking vengeance. And Carrington would know it was Parsons who had robbed him of the girl; for Carrington would inquire, and would discover that he had ridden into town

with Marion. And when Parsons and Marion rode into Dawes fear, stark, abject, and naked, was in the man's soul.

Dawes was aflame with light as the two passed down the street; and Parsons left the girl to sit on her horse in front of a darkened store, while he rode down the street, peering into other stores, alight and inviting. He hardly knew what he did want. He knew, however, that there was little time, for at any minute now Carrington might come thundering into town on his errand of vengeance; and whatever Parsons did must be done quickly.

He chose the second store he came to. He thought the place was a billiard-room until he entered and stood just inside the door blinking at the lights; and then he knew it was a saloon, for he saw the bar, the back-bar behind it, littered with bottles, and many tables scattered around. More, there were perhaps a hundred men in the place—some of them drinking; and at the sight of them all, realizing the mightiness of their number, Parsons raised his hands aloft and screamed frenziedly:

“Men! There's been a crime committed tonight! At the Huggins house! Carrington did it! He abducted my niece! I want you men to help me! Carrington is going to kill me! And I want you to protect my niece!”

For an instant after Parsons' voice died in a breathless gasp, for he blurted his story, the words coming in a stream, with hardly a pause between them; there was an

odd, strained silence. Then a man far back in the room guffawed loudly:

"Plumb loco. Too much forty-rod!"

There was a half-hearted gale of laughter at the man's taunt; and then many men were around Parsons, ready to laugh and jeer. And while some of the men peered at Parsons, cynically inspecting him for signs of drunkenness, several others ran to the open door and looked out into the street.

"There's somethin' in his yappin', boys," stated a man who returned from the door; "there's a gal out here, sure enough, setting on a hoss, waitin'."

There was a concerted rush outside to see the girl, and Parsons was shoved and jostled until he, too, was forced to go out. And by the time Parsons reached Marion's side she had been questioned by the men. And wrathful curses arose from the lips of men around her.

"Didn't I know he was that kind of a skunk!" shouted a man near Parsons. "I knowed it as soon as he beat Taylor out of the election!"

"I'm for stringin' the scum up!" yelled another man. "This town can git along without guys that go around abductin' wimmen!"

There were still other lurid and threatening comments. And many profane epithets rose, burdened with menace, for Carrington. But the girl, humiliated, weak, and trembling, did not hear all of them. She saw other men

emerging from doorways—all of them running toward her to join those who had come out of the saloon. And then she saw a woman coming toward her, the men making a pathway for her—a motherly looking woman who, when she came near the girl, smiled up at her sympathetically and reached up her hands to help the girl out of the saddle.

Marion slipped down, and the woman's arms went around her. And with many grimly pitying glances from the men in the crowd about her, which parted to permit her to pass, she was led into a private dwelling at a little distance down the street, into a cozy room where there were signs of decency and refinement. The woman placed the girl in a chair, and stood beside her, smoothing her hair and talking to her in low, comforting tones; while outside a clamor rose and a confused mutter of many voices out of which she began to catch sentences, such as:

“Let's fan it to the big house an' git him!”

“There's too many crooks in this town—let's run 'em out!” “What in hell did he come here for?” “Judge Littlefield is just as bad—he cheated Taylor out of the election!” “That's right,” answered another voice. “Taylor's our man!”

“They are all wrought up over this, my dear,” said the woman. “For a long time there has been an under-current of dissatisfaction over the way they cheated Quinton Taylor out of the mayoralty. I don't think it

was a bit fair. And," she continued, "there are other things. They have found out that Carrington is behind a scheme to steal the water rights from the town—something he did to the board of directors of the irrigation company, I believe. And he has had his councilmen pass laws to widen some streets and open new ones. And the well-informed call it a steal, too. Mr. Norton has stirred up a lot of sentiment against Carrington and Danforth, and all the rest of them. Secretly, that is. And there is that murder charge against Quinton Taylor," went on the woman. "That is preposterous! Taylor was the best friend Larry Harlan ever had!"

But the girl turned her head, and her lips quivered, for the mention of Taylor had brought back to her the poignant sense of loss that she had felt when she had learned of the charge against Taylor. She bowed her head and wept silently, the woman trying again to comfort her, while outside the noise and tumult grew in volume—threatening violence.

By the time Marion Harlan had dropped into the chair in the room of the house into which the woman had taken her, the crowd that had collected in the street was packed and jammed against the buildings on each side of it.

Those who had come late demanded to be told what had happened; and some men lifted Parsons to the back of his horse, and with their hands on his legs, bracing

him, Parsons repeated the story of what had occurred. More—yielding to the frenzy that had now taken possession of his senses, he told of Carrington's plotting against the town; of the man's determination to loot and steal everything he could get his hands on. He told them of his own culpability; he assured them he had been as guilty as Carrington and Danforth—who was a mere tool, though as unscrupulous as Carrington. He gave them an account of Carrington's stewardship of his own money; and he related the story of Carrington's friendship with the governor, connecting Carrington's trip to the capital with the stealing of the election from Taylor.

It is the psychology of the mob that it responds in some measure to the frenzy of the man who agitates it. So it was with the great crowd that now swarmed the wide street of Dawes. Partisan feeling—all differences of opinion that in other times would have barred concerted action—was swept away by the fervent appeal Parsons made, and by his complete and scathing revelation of the iniquitous scheme to rob the town.

A great sigh arose as Parsons finished and was drawn down, his hat off, his hair ruffled, his eyes gleaming with the strength of the terrible frenzy he was laboring under. The crowd muttered; voices rose sharply; there was an impatient movement; a concerted stiffening of bodies and a long pause, as of preparation.

Aroused, seething with passion, with a vindictive desire for action, swift and ruthless, the crowd waited — waited for a leader. And while the pause and the mutterings continued, the leader came.

It was the big, grim-faced Bothwell, at the head of the Arrow outfit. With his horse in a dead run, the other horses of the outfit crowding him close, Bothwell brought his horse to a sliding halt at the edge of the crowd.

Bothwell's eyes were ablaze with the light of battle; and he stood in his stirrups, looming high above the heads of the men around him, and shouted:

"Where's my boss — Squint Taylor?" And before anyone could answer — "Where's that damned coyote Carrington? Where's Danforth? What's wrong here?"

It was Parsons who answered him. Parsons, again clambering into the saddle from which he had spoken, now shrieking shrilly:

"It's Carrington's work! He abducted Marion Harlan, my niece. He's a scoundrel and a thief, and he is trying to ruin this town!"

There was a short silence as Parsons slid again to the ground, and then the man growled profanely:

"Let's run the whole bunch out of town! Start something, Bothwell!"

Bothwell laughed, a booming bellow of grim mirth that stirred the crowd to movement. "We've been startin'

somethin'! This outfit is out for a clean-up! There's been too much sneakin' an' murderin'; an' too many fake warrants flyin' around, with a bunch like them Keats guys sent out to kill innocent men. Damn their hides! Let's get 'em—all of 'em!"

He flung his horse around and leaped it between the other horses of the Arrow outfit, sending it straight to the doors of the city hall. Closing in behind him, the other members of the Arrow outfit followed; and behind them the crowd, now able to center its passion upon something definite, rushed forward—a yelling, muttering, turbulent mass of men intent to destroy the things which the common conscience loathes.

It seemed a lashing sea of retribution to Danforth and Judge Littlefield, who were in the mayor's office, a little group of their political adherents around them. At the first sign of a disturbance, Danforth had attempted to gather his official forces with the intention of preserving order. But only these few had responded, and they, white-faced, feeling their utter impotence, were standing in the room, terror-stricken, when Bothwell and the men of the Arrow outfit, with the crowd yelling behind them, entered the door of the office.

The little, broken-nosed man had done well to leave the vicinity of the big house before Taylor arrived there. For when Taylor emerged from the front room, in which

the light still burned, his soul was still in the grip of a lust to slay.

He was breathing fast when he emerged from the house, for what he saw there had puzzled him—the guard lying on the floor and Marion gone—and he stood for an instant on the porch, scanning the clearing and the woods around the house with blazing eyes, his guns in hand.

The silence around the house was deep and solemn now, and over Taylor stole a conviction that Carrington had sent Marion to Dawes in charge of some of his men; having divined that he would come for her. But Taylor did not act upon the conviction instantly. He ran to the stable, stormed through it—and the other buildings in the cluster around the ranchhouse; and finding no trace of men or girl, he at last leaped on Spotted Tail and sent him thundering over the trail toward Dawes.

When he arrived in town a swaying, shouting, shooting mob jammed the streets. He brought his horse to a halt on the edge of the crowd that packed the street in front of the city hall, and demanded to know what was wrong.

The man shouted at him:

“Hell’s to pay! Carrington abducted Marion Harlan, an’ that little guy—Parsons—rescued her. An’ Parsons made a speech, tellin’ folks what Carrington an’ Danforth an’ all the rest of the sneakin’ coyotes have

done, an' we're runnin' the scum out of town!" And then, before Taylor could ask about the girl, the man raised his voice to a shrill yell:

"It's Squint Taylor, boys! Squint Taylor! Stand back an' let ol' Squint take a hand in this here deal!"

There was a wild, concerted screech of joy. It rose like the shrieking of a gale; it broke against the buildings that fringed the street; it echoed and reechoed with terrific resonance back and forth over the heads of the men in the crowd. It penetrated into the cozy room of a private dwelling, where sat a girl who started at the sound and sat erect, her face paling, her eyes, glowing with a light that made the motherly looking woman say to her, softly:

"Ah, then you *do* believe in him, my dear!"

It was when the noise and the tumult had subsided that Taylor went to her. For he had been told where he might find her by men who smiled sympathetically at his back as he walked down the street toward the private dwelling.

She was at the door as soon as he, for she had been watching from one of the front windows, and had seen him come toward the house.

And when the motherly looking woman saw them in each other's arms, the moon and the light from within the house revealing them to her, and to the men in the

crowd who watched from the street, she smiled gently. What the two said to each other will never be known, for their words were drowned in the cheer that rose from hoarse-voiced men who knew that words are sometimes futile and unnecessary. !

CHAPTER XXXV.

TRIUMPH AT LAST

A MONTH later, Taylor walked to the front door of the Arrow ranchhouse and stood on the threshold looking out over the great sweep of green-brown plain that reached eastward to Dawes.

A change had come over Taylor. His eyes had a gentler light in them—as though they had seen things that had taken the edge off his sterner side; and there was an atmosphere about him that created the impression that his thoughts were at this moment far from violence.

“Mr. Taylor!” said a voice behind him—from the front room. There had been an undoubted accent on the “Mr.” And the voice was one that Taylor knew well; the sound of it deepened the gentle gleam in his eyes.

“Mrs. Taylor,” he answered, imparting to the “Mrs.” exactly the emphasis the voice had placed on the other.

There was a laugh behind him, and then the voice again, slightly reproachful: “Oh, that sounds so *awfully* formal, Squint!”

“Well,” he said, “you started it.”

“I like ‘Squint’ better,” said the voice.

"I'm hoping you keep on liking Squint all the days of your life," he returned.

"I was speaking of names," declared the voice.

"Doan' yo' let her fool yo', Mr. Squint!" came another voice, "fo' she think a heap mo' of you than she think of yo' name!"

"Martha!" said the first voice in laughing reproof, "I vow I shall send you away some day!"

And then there was a clumping step on the floor, and Martha's voice reached the door as she went out of the house through the kitchen:

"I's goin' to the bunkhouse to expostulate wif that lazy Bud Hemmingway. He tole me this mawnin' he's gwine feed them hawgs — an' he ain't done it!"

And then Mrs. Taylor appeared at the door and placed an arm around her husband's neck, drawing his head over to her and kissing him.

She looked much like the Marion Harlan who had left the Arrow on a night about a month before, though there was a more eloquent light in her eyes, and a tenderness had come over her that made her whole being radiate.

"Don't you think you had better get ready to go to Dawes, dear?" she suggested.

"I like that better than 'Squint' even," he grinned.

For a long time they stood in the doorway very close together. And then Mrs. Taylor looked up with grave eyes at her husband.

"Won't you please let me look at *all* of father's note to you, Squint?" she asked.

"That can't be done," he grinned at her. "For," he added, "that day after I let you read part of it I burnt it. It's gone—like a lot of other things that are not needed now!"

"But what did it say—that part that you wouldn't let me read?" she insisted.

"It said," he quoted, "'I want you to marry her, Squint.' And I have done so—haven't I?"

"Was that *all*?" she persisted.

"I'd call that plenty!" he laughed.

"Well," she sighed, "I suppose that will have to be sufficient. But get ready, dear; they will be waiting for you!" She left him and went into a room, from where she called back to him: "It won't take me long to dress." And then, after an interval: "Where do you suppose Uncle Elam went?"

He scowled out of the doorway; then turned and smiled. "He didn't say. And he lost no time saying farewell to Dawes, once he got his hands on the money Carrington left." Taylor's smile became a laugh, low and full of amusement.

Shortly Mrs. Taylor appeared, attired in a neat riding-habit, and Taylor donned coat and hat, and they went arm in arm to the corral gate, where their horses were standing, having been roped, saddled, and bridled by the

"lazy" Bud Hemmingway, who stood outside the bunk-house grinning at them.

"Well, good luck!" Bud called after them as they rode toward Dawes.

Lingering much on the way, and stopping at the Mul-larky cabin, they finally reached the edge of town and were met by Neil Norton, who grinned widely when he greeted them.

Norton waved a hand at Dawes. As in another time, Dawes was arrayed in holiday attire, swathed in a riot of color—starry bunting, flags, and streamers, with hundreds of Japanese lanterns suspended festoonlike across the streets. And now, as Taylor and the blushing, moist-eyed woman at his side rode down the street, a band on a platform near the station burst into music, its brazen-tongued instruments drowning the sound of cheering.

"We got that from Lazette," grinned Norton. "We had to have *some* noise! As I told you the other day," he went on, speaking loudly, so that Taylor could hear him above the tumult, "it is all fixed up. Judge Littlefield stayed on the job here, because he promised to be good. He hadn't really done anything, you know. And after we made Danforth and the five councilmen resign that night, and saw them aboard the east-bound the next morning, we made Littlefield wire the governor about what had happened. Littlefield went to the capital shortly afterward and told the governor some things that

astonished him. And the governor appointed you to fill Danforth's unexpired term. But, of course, that was only an easy way for the governor to surrender. So everything is lovely."

Norton paused, out of breath.

And Taylor smiled at his wife. "Yes," he said, as he took her arm, "this is a mighty good little old world — if you treat it right."

"And if you stay faithful," added the moist-eyed woman.

"And if you fall in love," supplemented Taylor.

"And when the people of a town want to honor you," added Norton significantly.

And then, arm in arm, followed by Norton, Taylor and his wife rode forward, their horses close together, toward the great crowd of people that jammed the street around the band-stand, their voices now raised above the music that blared forth from the brazen instruments.

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